15c

LOVE STORIES OF THE REAL WEST

RANCH ★ ROMANCES

Second October Number

Dead or Alive

By AMOS MOORE

WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

TAKE THE TOBACCO FROM YOUR TEETH

Let your mouth wake up and live

NOTHING LIKE LISTERINE TOOTH PASTE FOR GETTING RID OF TOBACCO DEPOSITS AND TASTE
FOR REAL RESULTS MY MONEY IS ON LISTERINE TOOTH PASTE

A million men are chanting the praise of Listerine Tooth Paste

Why not start using Listerine Tooth Paste right now? We'll wager you will like it better than any you've ever used. A million men say here's a dentifrice with real action . . . real results. And real economy, too. Think of it! More than ¼ pound of first-rate dentifrice in the big 40¢ tube.

Fights smokers' teeth

Discover for yourself how easily it erases from your teeth those ugly deposits stained by tobacco smoke. Your teeth stand revealed sturdy, white, and shining. Feel it wake up your mouth and gums. You never knew anything so stimulating as that wonderful feeling of freshness it gives.

Your breath, sir

See how Listerine Tooth Paste combats breath odors that do you no good socially or in business. You'd expect such action, of course, from the name this tooth paste bears.

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More than ¼ POUND of tooth paste in the double size tube 40¢

Regular size tube · 25¢

HOW A FREE LESSON STARTED BILL ON THE WAY TO A GOOD RADIO JOB

I HAVEN'T HAD A RAISE IN YEARS -- GUESS I NEVER WILL -- I'M READY TO GIVE UP
BUCK UP, BILL, WHY NOT TRY AN INDUSTRY THAT'S GROWING -- WHERE THERE'S MORE OPPORTUNITY

MARY'S RIGHT -- I'M NOT GETTING ANYWHERE. I OUGHT TO TRY A NEW FIELD TO MAKE MORE MONEY
LOOK AT THIS - RADIO IS CERTAINLY GROWING FAST -- AND THE NATIONAL RADIO INSTITUTE SAYS THEY TRAIN MEN FOR RADIO RIGHT AT HOME IN SPARE TIME
I DON'T THINK I COULD LEARN RADIO THAT WAY -- BUT THEY'LL SEND ME A SAMPLE LESSON FREE. GUESS I'LL MAIL THE COUPON AND LOOK INTO THIS

Find out how practical it is to

Train at Home for a Good RADIO Job

I'll send a sample lesson FREE

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914

Do you want to make more money? I'm sure I can train you at home in your spare time for a good Radio Job. I will send you a sample lesson absolutely FREE. Examine it, read it, see how easy it is to understand even if you've never had any technical experience or training.

Many Radio Experts Make $30, $50, $75 a Week

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to $5,000 a year. Spare time Radio set servicing pays as much as $200 to $500 a year. Full time Radio servicing jobs pay as much as $30, $50, $75 a week. Many Radio Experts own and operate their own full time or part time Radio sales and service businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen paying up to $6,000 a year. Radio operators on ships get good pay, see the world besides. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems offer good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises many good jobs soon. Men I trained are holding good jobs in all these branches of Radio.

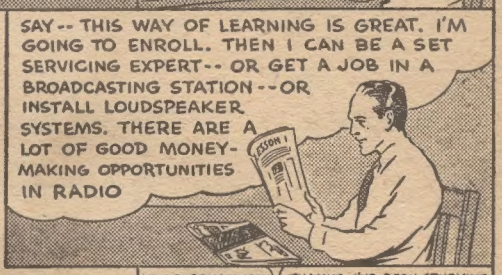
Many Make $5, $10, $15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

Almost every neighborhood needs a good spare time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets. They show you how to do Radio repair jobs; how to cash in quickly. Throughout your training I send you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money—$200 to $500 a year—for hundreds of fellows. I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important Radio principles. My training gives you practical Radio experience while learning.

Get My Lesson and 64-Page Book FREE. Mail Coupon.

In addition to my Sample Lesson, I will send you my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." Both are free to any fellow over 16 years old. My book points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my Training in Radio and Television; shows my Money Back Agreement; shows letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers. YOU! MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a penny postcard—NOW!

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 7KM
Washington, D. C.


SAY -- THIS WAY OF LEARNING IS GREAT. I'M GOING TO ENROLL. THEN I CAN BE A SET SERVICING EXPERT -- OR GET A JOB IN A BROADCASTING STATION -- OR INSTALL LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEMS. THERE ARE A LOT OF GOOD MONEY-MAKING OPPORTUNITIES IN RADIO
LESSON 1

YOU SURELY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
THANKS. I'VE BEEN STUDYING ONLY A FEW MONTHS AND I'M ALREADY MAKING MONEY IN MY SPARE TIME. THAT'S $10 EXTRA THIS WEEK

OH BILL, I'M SO GLAD YOU SENT FOR THAT FREE LESSON AND PROVED TO YOURSELF THAT YOU COULD LEARN RADIO AT HOME
YES, I HAVE A GOOD FULL TIME RADIO JOB NOW -- AND A BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD IN RADIO

MAIL THIS NOW

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send the sample lesson and your book which tells about the opportunities in Radio and your 50-50 method of training men at home to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

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Vol. LXXVII

RANCH ROMANCES

No. 3

FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor
J. B. MAGILL, Managing Editor

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In the First November Number

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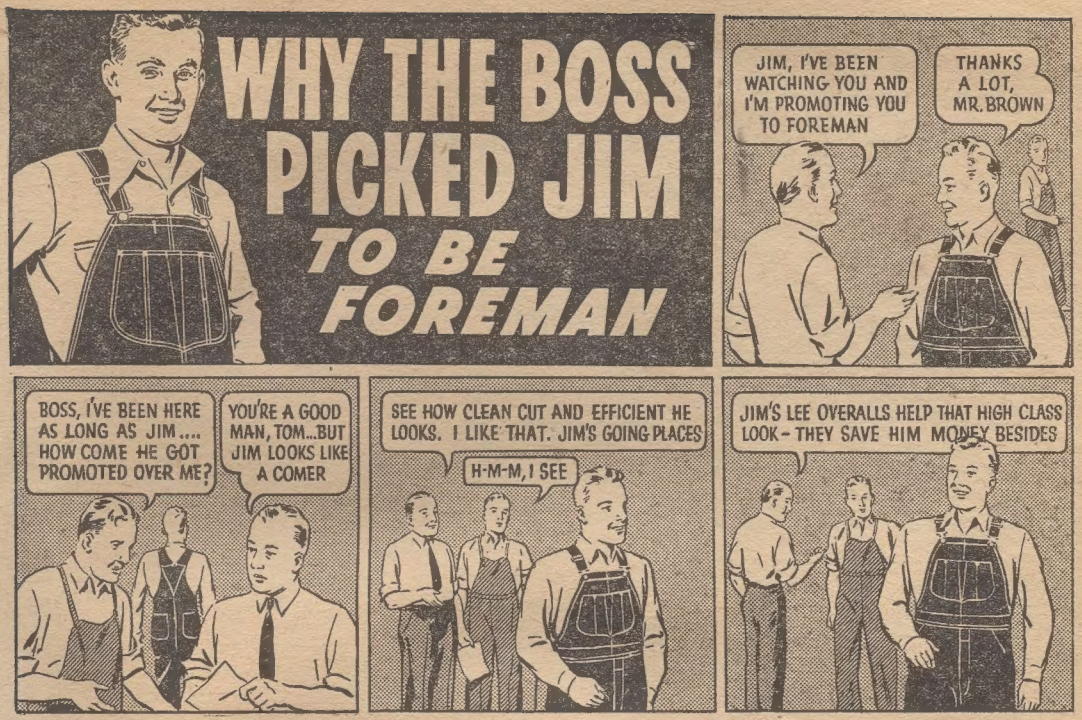
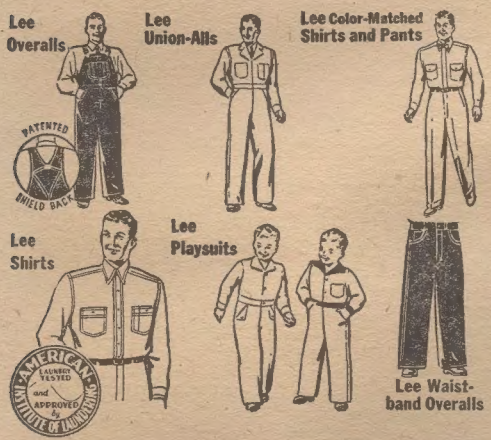

WHY THE BOSS PICKED JIM TO BE FOREMAN
JIM, I'VE BEEN WATCHING YOU AND I'M PROMOTING YOU TO FOREMAN
THANKS A LOT, MR. BROWN
BOSS, I'VE BEEN HERE AS LONG AS JIM.... HOW COME HE GOT PROMOTED OVER ME?
YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, TOM...BUT JIM LOOKS LIKE A COMER
SEE HOW CLEAN CUT AND EFFICIENT HE LOOKS. I LIKE THAT. JIM'S GOING PLACES
H-M-M, I SEE
JIM'S LEE OVERALLS HELP THAT HIGH CLASS LOOK - THEY SAVE HIM MONEY BESIDES

YES, LEE OVERALLS MAKE YOU LOOK LIKE "A COMER"!



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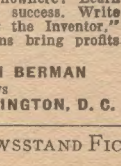

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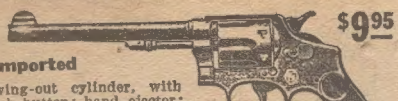

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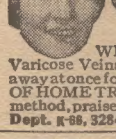

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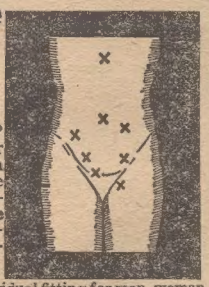

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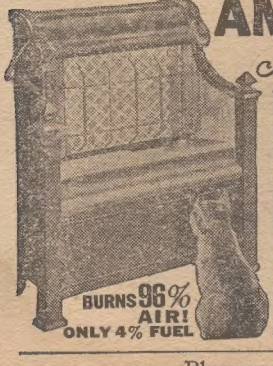

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"It's all over now, ma'am," Slim told her reassuringly.

Dead or Alive

By Amos Moore

"A murderer!" the lovely golden-haired Mary Lou had called Slim. But Slim believed in dealing out Colt justice when a band of bank robbers and drygulchers terrorized his range.

CHAPTER I

A Message and a Meeting

SLIM CHESTER, owner of the S Bar C Ranch, cantering blithely down the dusty main street of Yellow Buttes with his foreman, Tom Barrett, was hailed by someone inside the brick building which housed the Cattlemen's Bank and Trust Company.

"Oh, Slim! Come on in here for a minute, will you? I want to talk to you." Slim's mother had hopefully named him Slade but he was known everywhere, affectionately, as Slim.

"Sure, Mr. Raymond," Slim called back, reluctantly reining in his horse. "What the devil do you s'pose he wants to talk to me about anyways, Tom?"

"Likely about the money you owe him," Barrett laughed, wondering if the demure *señorita* passing under the wooden awning of the feed store opposite appreciated the effect produced by the alternate blue and orange stripes of his new mail-order shirt.

"You know dang well I don't owe him a cent," snorted Slim. "I paid off the last of them notes over a month ago." He swung from the saddle, and grounded his reins: a tall, broad-shouldered, blue-eyed young fellow, with cleanly cut features and crisp, thick, dark brown hair. "Well, whatever it is, he probably won't keep me long. Where'll I find you, old-timer?"

"Oh, down to the Gayety. I reckon I might as well sift along and wait for you there. No use settin' here cookin' in the sun."

"All right, Tom. I'll be joinin' you *muy pronto.* But don't you drink up all the liquor Cassidy's got in the place before I get there. Remember you ain't

the only feller in our pardnership who's figurin' to do some celebratin' on account of it, and leave some for me. Nor don't you feel that locoed rainbow you're wearin' is wasted complete on the desert air—I noticed the lady wasn't interested in it none!—'cause George and the boys'll think it's swell."

Slim waved airily to his friend, and sauntered into the bank, where the genial president greeted him warmly and led the way past the cashier's cage to his private office.

"Sit down, Slim. Have a smoke." The bank president, Theodore Raymond, shut the office door, then took a smudged sheet of paper from the upper drawer of his desk, and passed it across to Slim. "Take a look at that."

It was a printed notice, captioned in large black type:

REWARD
$10,000
Dead or Alive

"So Sheriff Hammond's finally got the ante boosted to five figures, huh?" commented Slim, when he had read the brief document through. "Nobody can't say he's layin' down on the job. But he'd 'a' run them jaspers down long ago and put 'em where they belong if anybody had furnished a description of 'em that was worth two bits."

"They've seen to it that nobody's been left alive to furnish any description at all, Slim. And that's only one of Hammond's handicaps. This is a big county and he's got a lot of territory to cover. He can't be everywhere at once himself. He's been working with too few deputies and some dumb town marshals—"

"Like our esteemed Officer Newberry in town here?"

"Well, yes. Sam Newberry was certainly among the drags when brains were given out. I don't think much of him, either as a man or a marshal, and, just between you and me, Hammond doesn't either."

"Hammond," said Slim, "wouldn't, him bein' the best sheriff this county ever had. But that gang of stick-up men must've been givin' him an awful headache lately."

"He's not the only one with an awful headache," responded the banker grimly. "Nor the only one who's been losing sleep nights. What you've heard or read in the papers isn't the half of it, Slim. Last week, this gang walked into the First National at Tellville in broad daylight. They shot the president, the cashier, and two depositors. Last month, they blew open the vault in the Shaytown Bank, and got away with twenty thousand dollars. They've gotten so brash that nobody feels safe; nobody knows who's turn it will be next."

"Might even be ours, right here in Yellow Buttes, huh? You never can tell where the lightnin' will strike next, can you?"

"That same idea has already occurred to me and to the sheriff," remarked the banker, and there was something in his voice that made Slim look at him with quick attention. "That's why I called you in here. I had a letter from Sheriff Hammond this morning, and he particularly wants to see you. He expects to be in town some time later today. You stick around until he comes, will you?"

"Black Jack Hammond wants to see me?" Slim exclaimed, in mock alarm. "Why, Mr. Raymond, I ain't done nothin' but bust the false bottom out of a crooked faro box 'bout three weeks ago. He don't suspicion I'm one of his bandits on account of that, does he?"

Raymond laughed. "Slim, this is no joking matter. Do you realize what might happen if this gang did decide that the bank here was a likely prospect? They're smart, they're daring, they're absolutely ruthless and unscrupulous. They leave no clues and no witnesses. A few dead men or even women make no difference whatever to them. Suppose they were to pay us a call now." The president gestured toward the main office, which presented a busy scene, with numerous ranchers

SLIM CHESTER

and cowboys passing in and out. "We'd be very lucky if we fared no worse than the bank at Tellville. Understand?"

"I reckon I do, Mr. Raymond. But—"

"The point is that Black Jack Hammond wants help to round up those murdering scoundrels. And he's going about getting it systematically. He's building up a sort of vigilante organization, with a branch in every town in the county that's important or even thinks it is. At the head of it, he's putting a key man—a trustworthy citizen who'll report directly to him. He wants you to take charge of the local branch. You're to get all the boys you've got complete confidence in banded together, and have them all primed and ready to give those bandits a warm reception if they've got us on their list. Will you undertake the job, Slim?"

"Why, of course I will, Mr. Raymond, if you and Black Jack Hammond really think I can handle it. But I ain't got a bunkhouse full of fancy gun-slingers. If it's shootin' talent Hammond wants, he'd ought to deputize Frank Larson or, better yet, that foreman of his, Jake Belden. Jake'd give your bank bandits a sleighride, all right. He like to scare the livin' daylights outa Tom Barrett the other day, blast him!"

"They didn't tangle, did they?"

"Gosh no! Tom's got too much good sense to commit suicide by mixin' it with Jake Belden. But he wasn't goin' to stand for havin' the S Bar C turned into no public grazin' ground, either. Seems some of Larson's cows 've been makin' free with our range; and when Tom said it had happened just about often enough, Belden turned nasty. It finally ended up with Tom tellin' Belden to keep his fences and his manners mended. Of course, Belden wouldn't 've took that much from him without a muss, only Tom had three-four of the boys with him and Belden was alone. At that, Tom told me afterwards he could almost hear himself makin' music with a harp."

"My advice would be for Tom to steer clear of Belden and Larson both," Raymond said gravely. "It's my opinion they're bad medicine."

"Mine, too," agreed Slim. "I give Tom strict orders to lay off 'em. If there's any more talkin' to be done, I'll tend to it myself."

"Well, Jake might be more inclined to listen to you, Slim." Theodore Raymond glanced at the young rancher's big black-butted forty-five, swung low on the front of his thigh in an open holster, the tip of which was tied down with a leather thong. "Tom's a quiet, harmless little fellow, and isn't exactly fluent in the only language Jake Belden understands. But since you've settled down to the serious business of cattle raising, most people have forgotten that you're not exactly a slouch with a sixgun. Belden wouldn't know, unless somebody told him; but Larson has lived next door to you long enough to remember. . . . Well, you'll be in town when Hammond comes? I've only given you the outline of his idea; he'll fill it in himself."

"Speakin' of the devil," Slim said, as they went out into the main office, "there comes Frank Larson now. And hell's delight! Look what he's got

with him! Is she a peach or is she a peach? I ask you, sir!"

Raymond craned his neck to see. "She's a peach, all right, Slim. And she's Frank Larson's niece! Can you tie that? Her name is Mary Lou Marshall, and she's come to pay Uncle Frank a visit at the F L Bar. She'll be here a couple of weeks or so. I don't think he was expecting her, but he had a telegram this morning, saying she was on her way and for him to meet the train."

"Now, Mr. Raymond, how do you, a married man with a growin' family, happen to know all this about a strange young lady?" demanded Slim, with a twinkle in his blue eyes. "Shame on you, sir!"

"Shame on me if I didn't know, considering the extreme privacy of any message sent from or received in our thriving metropolis, my dear fellow! But if I were your age, Slim, and not a married man with a growing family, and I saw Miss Mary Lou Marshall coming down the street, I know exactly what I'd do!"

"So do I," said Slim Chester, and stepped out of the doorway of the bank, just as the couple he and the president had been discussing approached the building.

Now there had never been any love lost between the respective owners of the S Bar C and the F L Bar. Frank Larson, far from being a good neighbor, had shown himself to be mean and petty, and not above encouraging the crowd of rough, hard-drinking men in his bunkhouse to annoy and irritate the punchers of the adjoining spread.

Slim Chester hadn't retaliated in kind, but had contented himself with standing up for his rights and seeing to it that they weren't infringed on too grossly. He had kept his head and his temper when it would have been very easy—and possibly disastrous for his flourishing ranch—for him to lose both. But he also had his own opinion of Mr. Frank Larson and all that gentleman's works; and the opinion was no flattering one.

Which, however, did not prevent him from sweeping off his broad-brimmed sombrero in a most gallant bow as he stepped from the doorway of the bank, nor from saluting Frank Larson in a manner which was the acme of cheerful affability.

"Howdy, Mr. Larson," he said. "It's a mighty pretty mornin', sir. Don't know's I recollect any nicer day we've had for quite a spell. Not too hot nor too cold—just right."

The speech, being translated, meant that Slim Chester thought Miss Mary Lou Marshall a mighty pretty girl, and that he couldn't recall ever having seen any other girl who, at first sight, had impressed him as being just right—all that a girl should be.

It was true that little Miss Marshall was well worth a second or even a third glance from any man. She was somewhat below the medium height, but beautifully made, with exquisitely formed hands, and small, high-arched feet that were very trig in silk stockings and patent leather pumps.

Her hair, thick and wavy, showed pure gold where the sun touched it. Her eyes, smiling at Slim Chester in the friendliest way in the world, were tawny brown, with dark brows and lashes—a combination which, with that aureole of spun-gold hair was exciting and dramatic. Slim liked, too, the unexpected firmness of her resolute little chin.

What a girl! Oh, what a girl! And what incredible luck that he, Slim Chester, who had never thought or cared much about girls anyway, should have been leaving the bank at the very moment when she'd happened to be passing with her uncle. Ordinary courtesy demanded that Larson stop and introduce him to the lovely stranger. There simply wasn't anything else for the fellow to do.

But it appeared that there was something else for Frank Larson to do, and he did it. He walked on, without

slackening his pace, and his extraordinarily attractive niece walked with him. She had to, because he had hold of her arm.

Slim was positive that she would have liked to stop, that she had expected to. She had hesitated and lost step with Larson, and her smile had spread from her tawny brown eyes to her lips, curving, parting them a little as if in shyly eager anticipation.

But Frank Larson didn't smile. Perhaps he had translated Slim's greeting accurately and knew that, had he been unaccompanied, he would have received a barely civil nod and no more from that young gentleman. Perhaps it was just his naturally cantankerous nature that made him reluctant to stop and pass the time of day. Or, again, perhaps he didn't care to introduce to his niece the man with whom his personal relations were more strained than with any other in the neighborhood—and they were strained with several.

At any rate, he didn't smile. He didn't speak. He merely emitted a porcine grunt which might have meant anything or nothing, and clumped along down the street, leaving Slim Chester standing bareheaded in the hot afternoon sunshine.

Slim looked after the retreating couple for a moment, and mentally expressed his opinion of a jasper who hadn't manners enough even to touch his hat if spoken to when he was accompanied by a young lady. Common decency had certainly required, anyway, that he shouldn't push a fellow almost off the sidewalk! But then, who had ever accused Frank Larson of possessing common decency?

Slim Chester shrugged his shoulders resignedly. Then, conscious that behind the polished plate glass window of the Cattlemen's Bank and Trust Company, Mr. Theodore Raymond was indulging in joyous laughter at his expense, he squared them, slapped his sombrero back on his head and, mounting his horse, clattered down the street in the direction of the Gayety Saloon.

He rode with a jaunty, debonair grace, and he didn't turn his head once to look at the sidewalk, along which pretty little Miss Mary Lou Marshall was daintily tripping by her uncle's side.

"A couple of weeks or so," Theodore Raymond had said—and she'd just gotten into town. Well, there would be other days!

CHAPTER II

Tom Barrett's Big Day

THE GAYETY wasn't by any means the largest or most pretentious liquor emporium in Yellow Buttes, but it was as respectable and decent as its proprietor, the sturdy, two-fisted George Cassidy, could make any saloon in a more or less wide open cow-town. Pay day on the various spreads in the vicinity always brought an influx of happy-go-lucky cowboys to Yellow Buttes, their wages burning in their pockets, bent on seeking relaxation after weeks and sometimes months of hard, monotonous work.

Stout arms akimbo, George Cassidy stood watching the reception accorded Tom Barrett, who was no sooner inside the swinging half-doors of the saloon than he was bombarded with invitations to drink with this group or that. Barrett was almost universally popular. Cheerful and unassuming, unfailingly good humored, he was a good fellow with other good fellows, and a free spender when he had any money in his pockets.

"Say, Thomas," someone called, "George has got a swell new brand. We call it hen liquor—says you lay right where you drink it. You gotta sample it with us quick!"

"Oh, I'll sample it, boys, but this first drink's on me," Tom Barrett said. "Set 'em up for all hands present, George. I had big news broke to me last night, so big I got to wash it down,

'cause I ain't rightly been able to swallow it yet."

George began rapidly to open bottles.

"She say yes when you asked her, Tom?"

"No, she didn't, and it wasn't no she. It was a him—my boss, Slim Chester. He tells me last night," Tom Barrett's voice was awed and a little husky; he couldn't actually believe as yet that such a miraculous piece of good fortune had befallen him, a simple cowpoke, "he tells me last night that him and me was to be pardners in the S Bar C ranch. Full pardners!"

"Hooray! Three cheers for Slim Chester and three more for Tom Barrett and then three more for 'em both together, pardners in the S Bar C!" shouted some exuberant soul.

Drinks were downed; congratulations were offered.

Every man in the room except four congratulated Tom. These four were F L Bar riders, playing draw poker at one of the tables farthest from the bar. They hadn't stood up with the rest to drink to Tom and their contribution to the general friendliness had consisted of covert sneers and slighting remarks.

"Sure does think he's high, low, jack and the game, now, don't he?" remarked one of them, Dave Petrie by name. He was a hawk-faced, lanky man, with the reputation of being able to drink anyone under the table and still walk a chalk line. "A no-'count little runt like him, and all this fuss bein' made 'cause he's got the dollars to buy a pardnership in the S Bar C. Don't it give you a pain, Bill?"

"Did you say he *bought* hisself a pardnership in the S Bar C, Dave?" a husky, blond-bearded giant who was known as English Bill—no one had ever heard his surname—spoke up. "Hell! Tom Barrett didn't do no buyin'. He bluffed hisself one. He made Jake Belden back down and eat his own words! Two-gun Jake Belden the terror of the range, bowin' and scrapin', meek as a teethin' baby, before a measly little runt who don't hardly know one end of a smoke-pole from the other! Scared, he was. I wisht we'd all been there to see it."

Forthwith, Dave Petrie and the other members of the group, demanded details; and English Bill furnished them with gusto. They chortled into their glasses. It was all very enjoyable.

So enjoyable, in fact, that the F L Bar merrymakers did not notice that Jake Belden had entered the saloon. Jake stood scowling angrily at the fuss being made over Tom's good fortune. He seethed with rage when he recalled having to back down to Tom the other day. Tom had had his men with him then, but now—Jake spotted English Bill and Petrie—Jake had his!

The big, stalwart Belden suddenly shouldered his way up to Tom, shoving cowboys roughly aside.

"What the hell's the idea, anyway?" he demanded, glaring at Tom. "Is this here saloon a public place where a feller can buy a drink, or just a private club for a lousy little cowpoke and his tin-horn crew? You answer me that, damn you!"

The affront was so unprovoked, so entirely unexpected, that for a moment no one answered. Too, the two-gun man's skill with his weapons was so well known that discretion certainly seemed the better part of valor.

"Why, we wasn't aimin' to do the exclusive, old-timer," someone said, with forced friendliness. "Nothin' like that. I'm buyin' this round. What'll you have, Jake?"

Belden glowered truculently at him. "What'll I have? Nothin' in this company! Mebbe you ain't exclusive, but I am—enough so I don't drink only with real men, and not with no dirty little bootlick for Slim Chester. When I've got to the point where I've got to mix with that cheap kind o' scum, there'll be ice water on tap in hell."

That Belden's sole purpose was to stir up trouble was so obvious, and the method he had chosen was so crude,

that, after Tom's first flash of rage and with two of his friends clamping on his arms so he couldn't hit or draw, he finally disdained to take up the challenge.

"You can't, Tom," a friend said. "He's drunk!" He didn't, as yet, understand that he himself was the only object of the gunman's animosity, and he didn't intend to ruin his big day by allowing himself to be drawn into a barroom brawl with a quarrelsome drunk.

Ignoring the insult, he moved some distance farther down the bar, where he was promptly joined by his friends. George Cassidy, scenting some sort of trouble, had hurried up with a bottle of his best rye; but, unfortunately, Cassidy had heard none of the conversation, and could see only that Belden had joined a group who had rather unceremoniously withdrawn and left him to himself.

A foolish thing for them to do, thought Cassidy, considering Belden's well known touchiness and his reputation as a bad actor. No matter whether they liked him or not, the boys could have been a bit more diplomatic in their behavior. They should have stood him a drink or two, and, pretty soon, he'd have sifted along to find more congenial company.

Cassidy strove to minimize their error of judgment by pouring out a large glass of straight rye for Belden and bringing into play his broad Irish smile.

"This is on the house, Jake," said he. "Drink hearty!"

Jake Belden lifted the brimming glass from the bar, but he did not drink from it. Instead, with a flirt of his wrist, he flung both liquor and glass full into George Cassidy's smiling face, wheeled, and walked along the bar until he was directly behind Barrett.

"Barrett!" he rasped. "Turn around here, you bum!"

Tom Barrett turned and, looking at the vicious, rage-inflamed face of the gunman, realized with a sinking sen-

TOM BARRETT

sation at the pit of his stomach that Jake Belden wasn't drunk and that, in all probability, his own minutes were numbered.

In a showdown with the fighting ace of the F L Bar Tom knew he'd have all the chance of a kitten contending with a full grown grizzly bear. He must keep his head. He should be big enough, too, to overlook the deliberate insults of a raving mad man.

"Don't, Tom! Don't pay any attention to the fool," his friends urged.

He asked very quietly, "Well, Belden, what is it you want of me?"

Belden, a full head taller, fifty or sixty pounds heavier, thrust a stubbled chin forward and sneered savagely at him.

"Me want of you? Nothin', feller, except to tell you public that you're a damn liar. I heard you'd been boastin' all 'round that you got the better of Jake Belden in a argument and made him back down!"

"But I didn't," protested Tom. "I never said a word about—"

"Then *I'm* a liar, huh? Is that what you're meanin'?"

"Certainly not. All I mean is that you've made a mistake. I haven't mentioned our argument to anyone."

"And I say you have! You've made your brags about it all over town! And

don't you go contradictin' me again, Barrett, 'cause it won't do you no good. You'll apologize for what you said just now, tellin' Jake Belden he's a liar to his teeth! You can't get away with it, and don't you think for one little minute you can. Apologize!"

"Don't pay no attention to the drunk fool, Tom; let him rave if he wants to," Chuck Wickham, standing at Barrett's side, begged urgently.

Jake Belden caught up the phrase.

"Pay no attention? 'Course he won't, no more'n he did when I called him a dirty bootlicker for Slim Chester. He ain't got the guts of a spotty louse. You can say anythin' you like to him—do anythin' you like, an' he dasn't make a move. Here, I'll show you!" He took a short step forward and deliberately spat in Tom Barrett's face.

It was a face that had gone rather white under its tan, because its owner knew now, beyond all peradventure, that he was doomed. There were some things that a man couldn't stand for and still term himself a man. He'd done his best to stave off trouble, even to the extent of letting Jake Belden call him a liar and a dirty bootlicker. And his best hadn't been good enough. It seemed that the big day of his life was also to be his last day. He had to resent that final beastial insult; he had to go for his gun.

But his hand had hardly started the movement toward the weapon when the barroom of the Gayety reverberated to the roar of one of Belden's forty-fives, and the little foreman, shot squarely through the heart, collapsed in a heap at the feet of his horrified friends.

With both guns drawn and swinging so that their muzzles covered the suddenly silent crowd, Belden issued his blanket defiance.

"Any of you birds wantin' a dose of the same? If you do, speak right up—now's your time! And I'll give you an even break, which is more than Barrett give me! He went for his gun first and I had to shoot him in self-defense. Ain't no argument about that, is they?" He glared about the barroom.

There wasn't; not, at any rate, any audible argument. Not a man in the room but realized that an incautious word or gesture might bring on him the same fate that had overtaken poor harmless Tom Barrett. A drunken gunman on the rampage. . . .

"I'll be rememberin' you jaspers," Belden said loudly, "and it'll be the worse for any of you that tries to change your minds afterwards. You all saw Barrett reach for his gun 'fore I made any move to pull mine, didn't you? Well, don't try tellin' no fairy tales about that when the marshal checks up, that's all!"

With his forty-fives still leveled, he backed slowly out through the swinging half-doors. Then, holstering the weapons, he walked rapidly across the street to Halpern's Top Notch Corral and Livery Stable, just as Slim Chester jogged up to the entrance to the Gayety saloon and, dismounting, tied his horse at the end of the long row of cow ponies switching their tails and drowsing in the shade along the hitch-rack.

CHAPTER III

"Just Plain Murder"

INSIDE the building, all was dismay and consternation. Now that it was too late to be of any use, a horse wrangler from the Cross Diamond outfit, who had been seated at a table near the one occupied by Jake Belden's pals, the four poker players, bethought himself of the fact that these four hadn't stood up when the toasts to the new partners in the S Bar C were proposed. They had unostentatiously departed by way of the side door just before the fatal shooting had taken place.

Almost everyone had something to say, and said it emphatically. A perfect babel of voices assailed Slim Chester's ears as he came into the barroom, a babel which, as soon as he was

recognized, stilled to a hushed and pregnant silence, broken only by George Cassidy, who was saying over and over, "I'd have given my right arm to have prevented this, I tell you," like the monotonous refrain of a song.

There was something about the quality of that sudden strange hush that sent a cold shiver of apprehension through Slim Chester's veins. There was something—some object—over there on the floor by the bar. Slim went toward it, through the closely packed crowd which parted to let him pass. He knew intuitively what he was going to see, before he stood in the narrow circle of men gathered about the dead body of his best friend.

That brand new shirt with the alternate blue and orange stripes of which Tom Barrett had been so proud was stained scarlet now with the blood that had flowed from a small round dark wound directly over the heart, and the scarlet was powderflecked.

"Who did this?" Slim asked, his eyes, cold and hard as Arctic ice, fixed, on the owner of the Gayety. "Speak up, Cassidy!"

"It—it was Jake Belden, Slim. And I'd have given my right arm to prevent it. You know I would, Slim."

"Yeah? How did it happen that Tom tried to shoot it out with that feller? He'd no more chance against him than a louse in a larkspur bottle. And you now that! Tom wasn't no gunfighter."

The confused babel of voices broke out again excitedly.

"'Course he wasn't. Tom was always a rotten shot. He—"

"Slim, he tried to duck trouble, but Belden wouldn't have it. Roughed him up, insulted him until he just had to go for his gun."

"He didn't have no chance from the start, Slim. We all thought Belden was drunk and had wandered in here by mistake. We—"

"Stop!" It was the whip-like crack of the monosyllable, rather than the actual command itself that instantly stilled the clamor. Throughout the crowded barroom, one could have heard the proverbial pin drop. "I want the facts and I want 'em straight and quick. I can't listen to all of you. George, you tell me just exactly what happened."

George Cassidy told him, in a voice that choked up now and then so that he had to clear his throat. There was a deep red welt on one of the Irishman's florid cheeks where the whiskey glass had struck him, and there were tears in his eyes that were not the result of the high-proof whiskey which had been dashed into them. He wasn't at all ashamed of his grief, and he made no effort to conceal it.

"Slim, I loved Tom almost as much as if he'd been a son of my own. And if I'd had the least suspicion what that dirty varmint was up to—what he was aimin' to do when I spoke to him over the bar, I'd have broke him in pieces with my own two hands, I would, so help me, Gawd.

"But like the rest of the boys, and even Tom himself, I thought Belden was drunk. He looked drunk and ugly. It was my notion that I could mebbe kid him along a bit and ease him out before he tangled with somebody. Then he blinded me like for a minute, heavin' a glass of whiskey into my eyes. By the time I'd got 'em clear and could commence to see again, Tom was lyin' there dead on the floor, and Jake Belden—damn his black soul forever!—was backin' off toward the door, and darin' anybody to say he hadn't shot in self-defense—that Tom had gone for his gun first."

"Self-defense, hell!" Slim Chester rasped. "It was just plain murder!"

"Yeah; it was so. But nobody can't prove it on him, Slim," Miller, the owner of the Star in a Circle said regretfully. "I was alookin' right over here at the time. Tom was facin' me, with his back to the bar. And if I was to be put under my solemn oath in a law court this minute, I'd have to swear that Tom started to reach for his gun

before Belden made any move toward his. And I reckon anybody else who was watchin' would have to swear to the same, wouldn't you, boys?"

Dejectedly, at least half a dozen others, none of whom had any cause to be friendly to Jake Belden, agreed. As one of them put it, "Poor old Tom was so slow on the draw that he plumb telegraphed a week ahead what he was goin' to do."

"But why?" Slim demanded, and his voice had the same brittle quality that had silenced the crowd before. "Tom knew Belden would kill him if he reached for his gun. What did he do it for?"

"'Cause he couldn't do nothin' else, Slim. Belden spit in his face."

"That's enough!" snapped Slim. "I ain't got time to listen to no more now. I'll likely be back, but if I ain't, Chuck, you and Joe see to it that things are done right for Tom." He turned on his heel and was gone before anyone could make a move to stop him.

Not that anyone tried, though they all knew where he was going and why. They would, in a manner of speaking, have been ashamed of him and for him if he had not gone. They were all decent, law-abiding citizens, but they knew that there was a certain no-man's-land where the law, as such, could not effectively operate, and which was governed and dominated by the ruthless justice of the Colt.

CHAPTER IV

Nemesis

AS SLIM CHESTER had dismounted at the hitch-rack of the Gayety, he had seen Jim Belden hastening across the street in the direction of Halpern's Top Notch Corral and Livery Stable.

Belden's idea was to get his horse and ride out of town until the excitement died down. He had no doubt of his ability to cope with individuals bent on vengeance; but there might be some immediate danger of mob action. This would pass if he stayed out of sight for a few days. Calmer counsels would prevail, and the friends of the S Bar C foreman-partner would cool down, given a little time.

Nor was there anything to be feared from the law. While any number of witnesses to the shooting might be personally convinced that the killing had been deliberate and premeditated, the fact that Barrett had attempted to draw his gun first would be sufficient evidence to uphold a plea of self-defense. So that even if the local authorities were inclined to make trouble for Belden, they couldn't, because no jury of frontiersmen would convict him.

Furthermore, he wasn't at all sure that, once well away from Yellow Buttes, he'd come back to the town or to the F L Bar ranch. Frank Larson was going to be pretty sore at him because of his disobedience of orders, and of Frank Larson's anger he stood in genuine awe. He wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, but he was actually afraid of his gruff, taciturn boss. Unless he were certain of being able to square himself about the Tom Barrett affair, and he didn't believe that English Bill and the other two F L Bar men he'd seen in the saloon would be of much help to him in doing it, it might be just as well for him to keep on riding until he reached a different section of the country altogether.

However, he didn't have to decide about that this minute. He could mull it over and make up his mind, one way or the other, while he was on the trail out to the F L Bar, where he'd have to go anyway, in order to collect his blankets and pack his war sack.

He shouted loudly and profanely for Dan Halpern, the retired rancher who owned the Top Notch Corral. Immediately, Dan Halpern popped out of his office, a square cubicle which also did duty as a harness room, opposite the long row of roofed-over stalls. Hal-

pern had had the cubicle fitted with a door, and was wont, when the spirit moved him, to lock himself in with his musty ledgers and his ancient safe—which was about as burglar-proof as the big sheet iron stove on the top of which Dan cocked his heels while enjoying his pipe in solitary grandeur.

He was white-haired and white-bearded, and he had lost the sight of

MARY LOU MARSHALL

one eye; but age had robbed him of none of his peppery independence. He had made a comfortable fortune, and he was one of the directors of the Cattlemen's Bank and Trust Company.

"What's the idea of your cussin' round here, Jake Belden, like you was in one of them cheap honky-tonks where you hang out?" he demanded. "Somebody ought to learn you a few manners, man."

"Why shouldn't I cuss when I'm in a hurry and there ain't nobody on the job in this lousy dump?" retorted Belden. "As for my manners, it won't be you that'll be learnin' me different ones, Dan Halpern. You keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talkin' to me, else I'm liable to knock you hell west and curly!"

"Didn't I tell you not to cuss, huh?" the old gentleman bristled. "Well, I meant it. You can't scare me for a damn, Mister Jake Belden, not for one measly little damn! I'm an old man—years too old to take hombres of your breed serious. I don't pack no gun, but there's one in the safe in my private office, and I'll go get it if you don't stop usin' bad language in front of a lady."

Through the open door of the cubicle, Belden had a glimpse of a slender, golden-haired girl—a stranger who, he realized, could be no other than Frank Larson's niece. He dropped his voice to a surly growl, as he said:

"Aw, shut up, Santy Claus! How'd I know you was sparkin' a gal in there? Now get a move on and fetch me my hoss. I ain't got all day to stand here; I told you I was in a hurry, didn't I?"

More than ever in a hurry now, since the boss was somewhere about the premises and might put in an appearance at any minute. The telegram announcing the arrival of his niece, Mary Lou Marshal, hadn't been delivered at the F L Bar, but had been handed to Larson only after he had ridden into Yellow Buttes that morning, so that he had made no advance preparations for transporting the young lady and her luggage to the ranch, and would have to hire a rig from the livery stable for the purpose. Probably he was out by the barn now, superintending Dan Halpern's helpers in hitching up a team to the buckboard; and Belden was fairly itching to be mounted and away before Frank finished and drove around to the front.

"Keep your shirt on, Belden, and keep a civil tongue," Halpern admonished. "I'll get your cayuse for you, but if you're in such a tearin' hurry, you can bring your saddle out yourself. It's hangin' in the office—third peg from the door on the right."

The office was separated from the row of stalls opposite by a fairly wide passage, a level stretch of earth packed to the hardness of stone by the pounding of countless iron-shod hoofs, leading from the street to the barns and big open corral at the rear of the sheds.

Dan Halpern, humming under his breath, hobbled rheumatically along the stalls to the one in which Belden's horse was fastened, and Belden marched into the office after his belongings. He pretended not to see the girl, who was standing at one side of the room looking out through the grimy window up the main street, but went straight to the designated peg and, his arms full, turned to leave the office again.

He had not taken two steps away from the door when he heard his name called.

"Belden!"

Slim Chester was coming toward him from the street entrance to the passage, coming with long, even strides. Belden let his saddle and gear slip from his arms to the ground and faced about.

"That's my name. What're you wantin'?"

Slim kept right on advancing until less than a yard separated him from the gunman. Then:

"You, Belden," he said very softly. "I want you. It ain't but a little, I know, but that little I aim to get—now."

The smack of the heavy leather saddle on the hard earth of the passage had attracted the attention of Mary Lou Marshall, and she had walked over to look out through the doorway of the office to see what had fallen. She saw the faces of the two men who confronted each other with the space of less than a yard between them: faces in which there was something such as she had never before seen registered on a human countenance.

It was with a start of genuine amazement that she identified one of the two as the good-looking, picturesque young fellow, with the even white teeth and the friendly, smiling blue eyes who had bowed so gallantly to her and her uncle as they were passing the bank building only a few minutes before. She had wondered then why his pleasant greeting had earned him merely a disagreeable snub; she would have liked very much to know him, and had been piqued and not a little resentful because he hadn't been introduced to her.

At the time, she had wanted to ask her uncle why he hadn't stopped to present to her a young man who was surely as personable and well mannered as any she would be likely to meet during her stay at the F L Bar ranch. But Frank Larson's surliness, his scarcely civil attitude toward the handsome stranger had made her feel that perhaps it would not be quite tactful for her to question him.

Now, as she looked at Slim Chester, she thought she understood why her uncle had acted as he had. Gone was all the engaging, boyish charm that had so appealed to her. The face was as hard as flint, the lips set in a tight, grim line. The blue eyes were not smiling or friendly; they were cold and narrow and sharp as a sword.

"Jake Belden," he was saying, and Mary Lou Marshal would not have recognized the slow, deadly drawl for the same voice which had so cheerfully greeted them before: "Jake Belden, you're a rat. A filthy, murderin' rat, that's not fit to breathe the same air with white folks. You've gotten away with plenty in the past, but you've run out your string now."

Belden shifted his weight a little so that he was in his favorite position, but he took care that his arms were wide of his sides.

"If you mean that dust-up I had with your foreman, Chester," he said, "you're callin' the wrong card. I got a whole passel of witnesses—some of 'em mighty good friends of yours, too—that'll tell you what I done to Barrett I had to do in self-defense."

"Yeah; some of 'em has told me so already. It's just too bad, Belden, that some mighty good friends of yours aren't here now so's they'd be able to testify that what I'm goin' to do to you I had to do for the same reason. As it is, Dan Halpern 'll be the only one

who'll back up my self-defense plea for killin' you. Because I am goin' to kill you, Belden, right where you stand. That's what I come over here for, and I'm stayin' until I finish the job. It ain't no use for you to whine and stall; you'd best get it over with quick. You're all washed up, Belden, and a total loss to everyone except the undertaker. Now go for your gun, you white-livered hound!"

Jake Belden's upper lip twisted in the sly suggestion of a sneer. The situation couldn't have been more to his liking if he had arranged it himself. He'd heard vague rumors that Slim Chester knew how to handle a sixgun; but so supremely confident was he of his own speed and skill that he dismissed them for what he believed them to be worth. Anybody could pack a gun low and tie the holster down!

Here was a reckless young fool simply begging to be put out of the way! Well, he'd certainly be accommodated. Jake Belden gloatingly told himself that he would kill Slim Chester as he had killed Tom Barrett, and he'd do it in the same way, so that the law couldn't touch him in this case, either.

"I ain't goin' to do no such a thing," he said loftily. "I'm a peaceable, law-abidin' citizen, mindin' my own business, not a drug-store cowboy, full of bad liquor and huntin' a muss. You better trot on home and sleep off the load you got at Cassidy's my lad. And when you're sober, you'll thank your lucky stars I didn't call your bob-tail flush like I did Barrett's."

"Go for your gun, you swine!"

"I said nothin' doin', drunk." Belden's sly sneer had become open and mocking. With Chester losing his temper, it was really going to be too easy. "And you be on your way. I'm in a hurry, and I ain't stoppin' here to have no fool argument with you."

"No?" drawled Slim. "Well, just to make sure you mean that—" His left hand flashed out, and Jake Belden's head rocked from a stinging slap that left the marks of sinewy fingers imprinted plainly on his cheek. "Now will you go for your gun?"

And almost, the desperado did. The expression on his face was positively murderous. But he remembered his rôle in time, and ground out another negative from between clenched teeth.

Again, Slim brought his open palm against Belden's now crimsoned cheek, and the sound of the impact was like the crack of a mule-skinner's whip; it could have been heard across the street.

"I reckon you'll change your mind, Belden," Slim Chester purred, "because I'm goin' to rock your head from one side to the other until you do or I knock it off your shoulders. The only thing that's holdin it on now is the yellow streak you've got for a spine, you damn dirty coward. Go for your gun!"

Once more he struck the infuriated bully; and the third slap, delivered with all the force he could put behind it, was too much for Belden's self-control. With a vicious curse, he jumped back, and clawed for his forty-five. But lightning swift as his movement was, it was not swift enough. Slim Chester's Colt roared before Belden's had even cleared the holster.

For a second, the killer remained upright, swaying crazily in his tracks, while a splashing fountain of scarlet spurted from the severed artery in his throat. Then he pitched forward onto his face and lay still in the pool of his own blood that spread and widened until his head and arms were completely surrounded by it.

Slim Chester stood quietly contemplating the sprawled figure. He did not move for a moment, except automatically to expell the exploded shell from his gun and push a fresh cartridge into the empty chamber.

Then, thrusting the weapon back into its holster, he raised his head and turned away—to find himself looking straight into the eyes of a girl who, from the doorway of Dan Halpern's of-

fice, was staring at him in white-faced horror. Her eyes were distended with fear, her mouth curled with contempt.

CHAPTER V

The Arm of the Law

EVERY word, every move of Slim Chester during his encounter with Jake Belden had been carefully calculated. The storm of icy cold rage which had swept over him on learning of the wanton murder of his friend and partner had never for a moment clouded the clarity of his mind as he judged Belden and sentenced the killer to death. Grim and dispassionate, he had decided on the manner of executing the sentence, and then proceeded to carry out his plan precisely as he had conceived it.

Steeped in the code of the West as he was, it had not occurred to him at the time that there might be anything questionable about what he was doing.

It did not occur to him now. But when he saw the shocked horror in the face of Mary Lou Marshall, he was almost as shocked as she.

Not because he had committed an act which, as he conceived it, was not only right but imperatively necessary, but because the committing of it resulted in an abominable spectacle which he would not intentionally have permitted any woman to witness. He would have shielded her from the sight of it just as he would have shielded her from something that was obscene.

However, he gave no sign of any loss of self-possession as, removing his sombrero, he said gravely:

"I'm mighty sorry, ma'am, you happened to be here just now. If I'd known there was a lady in the office—" He stopped, as Mary Lou drew away from him with a gesture of shuddering repulsion, much, he thought, as she would have drawn away from some noxious reptile.

"If you'd known there was anybody in the office, you wouldn't have dared, you—you murderer!" she flung at him unsteadily.

Slim Chester shook his head.

"No, ma'am; you've got it all wrong," he said. "I ain't a murderer. But that man lyin' there was. That's why I killed him."

Mary Lou Marshall had plenty of pluck and courage of a high order, but the scene she had just witnessed might well have shaken nerves far stronger than those of a young girl. She was frightened and half-hysterical, and her knees were trembling under her so that she caught at the door jamb for support.

"You call him a murderer when I saw everything, from beginning to end?" Her voice rose a little, quavered on a thin, unnatural note. "Saw him try to avoid trouble with you—endure your insults until you struck him repeatedly? And then—even then, when he didn't offer the slightest resistance, and jumped back to get out of your way, you shot him down like a mad dog. I saw it all, I tell you! And if there's any law in this town, you'll answer to it for what you did. I'll denounce you to the authorities myself."

The smell of blood was sickening in her nostrils; the viscous scarlet pool had spread to within a few inches of the step where she stood, and a ray of sunlight, falling across it, winked and danced dizzily before her eyes. Putting up her arm to shut out the sight, she retreated blindly back into the office and stumbled to the chair by Dan Halpern's desk.

Slim was profoundly disturbed. She hadn't seen "all," by any means. She hadn't, for instance, seen Jake Belden's lightning-like attempt to draw his forty-five: the movement of the desperado's hand had been too swift for her eye to follow. And, no matter what she had seen, she didn't understand; she didn't know what it was all about.

She didn't know that Tom Barrett, one of the gentlest, kindliest, most good-natured fellows that ever walked

the earth, was lying dead in the Gayety across the way because this same Jake Belden, bully and coward, had taken advantage of his known superior skill in the use of a Colt to pay off a petty personal grudge. She didn't understand that Belden, technically within the law, was yet outside it in the judgment of every decent man; and that the duty of avenging Barrett had devolved on him, Slim Chester, Barrett's best friend.

But she had to be made to understand. Slim Chester couldn't have explained why, even to himself; but it had suddenly become of the utmost consequence to him that this pretty, golden-haired girl with the tawny brown eyes that were so wide with horror and aversion should understand his motives, should know that what he had done was an act of simple justice, nothing more or less.

He followed her into Dan Halpern's office and stood before her chair, hat in hand, like a suppliant at a throne.

"Miss Marshall, it ain't my way to annoy a lady when she's showed plain that she'd rather have my room than my company," he said earnestly. "But if you'd only listen to me a minute—just give me a chance to explain to you how it was—"

"I don't want to listen to you," she interrupted in a small, choked voice. "And you could explain from now until doomsday without changing my opinion of you one iota. Don't try to talk any more to me."

"But, Miss Marshall, it ain't fair for you to judge me without knowin' the facts," he protested. "And I know you want to be fair. You're that kind of girl—I saw that the minute I set eyes on you up in front of the bank. If you'll only let me tell you how—"

"You can't tell me anything except lies! My own sight and hearing told me the truth. I said I didn't want to listen to you, and I won't listen to you. If you— Oh, Uncle Frank, make him go away!" She sprang to her feet in agitated relief, as Frank Larson and Dan Halpern came hurriedly into the room. "Call the police and have him arrested. I saw him shoot and kill that man out there—he did everything possible to force a quarrel. He's drunk, he's dangerous."

"Steady, now, Mary Lou, steady now," Dan Halpern interrupted the girl's outburst. "Slim Chester ain't no more drunk than you are, and he's about as dangerous to right-livin' folks as a day old calf. . . . What did you perforate the skunk for, anyways, Slim?"

"Skunk?" Frank Larson almost shouted, before Slim could reply. "You're callin' my foreman a skunk, Dan Halpern—as loyal and hard-workin' a man as ever drawed pay from the F L Bar?"

"Your foreman, Uncle Frank? The man who was to meet us here?"

"Nobody else but, Mary Lou. And

FRANK LARSON

he was on time to the dot, the way he always is. On time, it seems like for this pie-eyed gunman to trail him over here to kill him."

"That's damn nonsense, Larson, and you now it!" shrilled the old livery stable-keeper indignantly. "First place, like I told Mary Lou and as anybody could see, Slim ain't pie-eyed. Second place, I've lived in this neck o' the

woods a considerable spell longer'n you have, and up to yet I haven't heard nobody call Slim Chester a gunman, which is more 'n I can say for a certain 'loyal and hard-workin' a man as ever drawed pay from the F L Bar.' And third place, Slim didn't trail Jake Belden over here to kill him."

"But he did, Mr. Halpern. I heard him say so myself!" Mary Lou cried vehemently. "I remember exactly what he said, 'Because I am going to kill you, Belden, right where you stand.' And he said: 'Dan Halpern'll be the only one who'll back up my plea of self-defense.' He can't deny that those were his very words and you can't, either, Mr. Halpern. You'd only just gone out of the office; you must have heard, too. And you must have seen!"

"No, I didn't hear, Mary Lou. I was gettin' Jake Belden's hoss out of a stall way down the second row. But I seen—"

"You didn't hear nothin' and you didn't see nothin' after Chester come in from the street, 'cause you was layin' flat on your belly in the straw!" jeered Larson. "Don't you tell me you wasn't. There's wisps of it stickin' in your billy-goat beard now."

"You're damn right I was layin' flat in the straw! I wasn't settin' up to be no backstop for any loose lead. I dropped down and I stayed down until it was all over. But I could see as plain as—"

But Frank Larson was evidently not too anxious to have Halpern tell what he had seen, not at that particular moment.

"You seen a lot, you did, with your snoot scrubbin' the straw! I wouldn't be a-tall surprised if this was all a put-up job with you, that you knew ahead of time that Slim Chester was out to get my foreman, Halpern."

"And I wouldn't be a-tall surprised if I wrapped that there buggy whip around them bandy legs of yours if you make one more dirty crack like that, Larson! By Godfrey damn! I don't have to take none of your low, crooked-minded insults, and I won't. You can get to hell outa my private office, beggin' your pardon for swearin', Mary Lou, or I'll call the help and have you thrown out! Start!"

"Go ahead and call the help. See what it gets you!" Larson sneered. "I ought to lay a complaint against you with Marshal Newberry for complicity in the shootin' of Belden, and have you jugged along with your friend, Slim Chester. Mebbe I will yet. . . . Come along in here, Sam, and arrest this varmint! We've got an eye-witness to the whole thing; my niece was right here and seen the murder done."

That Slim Chester had been unaware of the approach of the town marshal was not to be wondered at. Slim's back was toward the window, and the horses in the stalls, rendered frantic by the strong scent of blood, were snorting and stamping, so that the racket they made completely drowned out the footsteps of the marshal and of the three men who accompanied him: English Bill, Dave Petrie, and Thad Crawford, another F L gunman.

Loose-mouthed, sandy-haired, and with a thin, straggling reddish beard partially concealing the weakness of his receding chin, Marshal Sam Newberry entered, flanked by the F L Bar riders.

"Murder?" Sam asked. "I thought as much when I saw Chester high-tailin' it in here from the Gayety and then heard his shot. Chester, I'm puttin' you under arrest. Now I'll thank you to turn over that gun."

CHAPTER VI

Resisting Arrest

SLIM CHESTER slowly looked the marshal of Yellow Buttes over from head to foot, shrugged, and shook his head.

"Oh, no, Newberry. you're not puttin' me under arrest," he returned coolly. "And you can keep your

thanks, because I'm keepin' my gun, for the time bein'."

He had stepped back against the wall of the office, and his blue eyes were wary and watchful. A remark once made by an exasperated rancher had come to be almost axiomatic in the town—that "Sam Newberry never opened his mouth without puttin' his foot in it." And this time, the marshal had been guilty of two bald errors.

He had categorically stated that he had "seen Chester high-tailin' it in here from the Gayety," when he most certainly hadn't seen Slim cross the street or enter the Top Notch Corral at all; and he had brought with him three of Frank Larson's riders, men of most questionable reputation. Rather, it was they who had brought him!

Slim had no respect whatever for the marshal of Yellow Buttes. He had every respect for the law which the marshal was supposed to represent. Had the official walked into Dan Halpern's private office unattended, the young owner of the S Bar C would peacefully have surrendered his gun. He was accused of a capital crime and he would have submitted without protest to being locked up in the jail, secure in the knowledge that Sheriff Hammond would have him out again within five minutes of the sheriff's arrival in town.

But to turn over his gun and allow himself to be arrested by Newberry while that worthy was attended by three of the Larson outfit's bad hats, was something else again. It would be equivalent to signing his own death warrant.

And if he had misinterpreted the meaning of the furtive wink exchanged between English Bill and Dave Petrie, Larson's loud and instant exhortation of the marshal would have set him straight.

"You goin' to allow this murderin' devil to defy you to your teeth, Sam Newberry?" the F L Bar owner demanded. "What kind of a officer are you, anyways? If he resists arrest, you got a legal right to disarm him, and if you can't do it by yourself, you can call on any citizen to help you. There's four of us here—I ain't countin' Dan Halpern in, 'cause he ain't to be trusted 'bout anything Chester's mixed up in. Now, are you goin' to do your duty or ain't you?"

"Of course, I'm a-goin' to do my duty, Mr. Larson," the marshal assured him with an air of injured dignity. "And I won't be needin' no help, neither. Chester, you hand over that there gun and come along with me peaceable or take the consequences!"

But Slim Chester, knowing what the "consequences" would amount to for him, whether he handed over his gun or not, preferred instead to take advantage of the fact that he had one staunch friend in the stuffy, crowded office and that he had considerable speed on the draw.

Slim's gun was out of its holster and covering the hostile group before Sam Newberry had finished delivering his ultimatum, and he was edging quickly along the wall toward the door, which opened inward, and between which and him there was only one man — Dave Petrie.

"Stop him, Dave!" yelled English Bill and Frank Larson, as with one voice, and the marshal, who wouldn't have lifted a finger himself, shouted, "Petrie, I order you to stop that man!"

"You make one move to do it, Petrie, an' I'll blast a boulevard through your guts," Slim promised grimly. "Get outa my way and behave if you want to see starshine tonight, hombre."

Dave Petrie did want to see starshine tonight. And, orders or no orders, he didn't intend to create the diversion which would give some of the other men time to draw and fire their weapons. They would perhaps reap glory or even a cash reward for disposing of the troublesome Slim Chester; he, Petrie, would get a wooden overcoat and six feet of ground in boot hill. There was no percentage whatever in that sort of arrangement.

So Dave Petrie very sensibly disregarded the order that he offer himself up as a martyr to the sacred cause of justice and, instead, sidled toward Larson who, almost beside himself with impotent fury, had to stand and watch Slim Chester calmly back out of the door, and slam it after him.

It was a good stout door, but it shook and splintered under the volley of shots that crashed through it on the second that Slim's forty-five no longer covered the occupants of the office. If he had been standing on the other side of it, some of those shots would no doubt have taken effect. But he had instantly dropped below the level of the sill and crawled to one side, and he reached up only long enough to turn the key in the lock—on the outside, where old Dan Halpern had thoughtfully placed it when the marshal had first demanded that Slim surrender. Neither lock nor door would hold very long, of course, in the face of a determined assault; but Dan Halpern hadn't expected that Slim would remain in the vicinity of the Top Notch Corral and Livery Stable very long, once he had gotten out of the office.

In which expectation, the old gentleman was not disappointed. Slim sprinted out of the passageway and across the street to his horse, just as the swinging half-doors of the Gayety were thrust open and a crowd of cowboys and ranchmen poured from the building.

"Slim! Did you—"

"I did," Slim said. "Over to Halpern's. He'll tell you about it. I can't stop now. But you boys'll do me a big service if you'll stay away from the Top Notch—clean away. Sam Newberry's there, and Frank Larson's men; and they're all some considerable het up right now."

"So what? Who the hell cares about them?"

"I do, fellers. I left 'em locked in Dan's office whiles I come to get my hoss. But Larson's niece, a right sweet young girl is with him. We don't want to have no ruckus with her around. If you're honin' for a fight with the F L Bar, wait until she ain't in town."

"Well, but where are you goin' now, Slim?"

"Goin' to make myself scarce for the present. Black Jack Hammond's due here today, an' I'll see him when he comes. But I ain't bein' arrested by that gutless wonder, Sam Newberry, and I told him so."

"Bully for you, Slim! But you don't need to go off; we'll stand by you. Just let them dirty hellions get out and try to start somethin', and we'll show 'em who's who and what's what!"

"I don't doubt you would, fellers. But you'd be on the wrong side of the law, so long as Newberry's backin' 'em up. And we've had enough bloodshed. Wait for Hammond; he'll put everything straight. Besides, you've forgot what I told you about the lady. Chuck Wickham, and you, Joe Moreland, and all the rest of you boys sift back inside and charge a drink to me. I'd take it as a personal favor if you would."

All this was punctuated by the shots sounding in the stable. It would take a good bit of shooting to bring that heavy door open.

There were only one or two in the crowd who wanted to dissent from Slim's appeal. The rest readily saw the sound reasonableness of it—and, of course, he was perfectly right when he said they couldn't have any ruckus when there was a lady around, even though some were skeptical that any niece of Frank Larson could be a lady.

George Cassidy and Charlie Miller added the weight of their urging; and as Slim galloped up the main street, he had the satisfaction of seeing the crowd which had issued from the saloon all primed and ready for trouble, meekly trooping back inside again.

At the bank, Slim pulled up to beckon Theodore Raymond out and hurriedly outline to him all that had taken place.

"So I'm takin' a little huntin' trip this afternoon, Mr. Raymond," he finished. "If I'm home at the ranch, and Newberry and some of Frank Larson's gunmen come after me, there'll be a fight. I figure the best thing is for me to take to the hills and stay there until Sheriff Hammond gets the straight of this. I'll surrender to him any time he asks me to. You tell him he can find me at White Water Canyon tomorrow mornin', will you?"

"Of course, I will, Slim. I'll see him personally as soon as he gets into town." The banker held out his hand to press Slim's warmly. "I think you're doing exactly the right thing. And I think," he added, "you did exactly the right thing. Black Jack Hammond will agree. He knows you; and, just between you and me and your horse's ears, I've a pretty strong suspicion that he knows about Frank Larson and Sam Newberry. Now you'd better be getting along home. Take care of yourself, Slim."

The S Bar C did not employ many men, and no one but the cook was about the ranch house when Slim rode into the yard. He saddled up a fresh horse and left it standing in the shade of a cottonwood while he went into the house and got together the few things he would need for his "little camping trip" to White Water Canyon.

One of them was a Winchester rifle. Another was a Colt forty-five, twin of the weapon with which he had executed Jake Belden. He adjusted the crossed belts carefully, tied the tip of the left holster down to balance the right.

The cook, fat and roly-poly, placid to the verge of perpetual somnolence, yawned a question as he went down the kitchen steps and started across the yard.

"War broke out, boss, and you joined the artillery? Say, if anybody asks me where you are, what'll I tell 'em?"

Slim walked over to the cottonwood where his horse waited.

"What you haven't et won't never give you a belly ache, Gibbs," he replied cryptically over his shoulder. "So if anybody asks you where I am, you tell 'em you don't know."

CHAPTER VII

At the F L Bar

MARY LOU MARSHALL awoke just before dawn, in the same bed, in the same square, steep-raftered room she had occupied when a child. And in the infinitesimally brief period between half and full consciousness, the illusion was strong upon her that she was still a child; that, presently, she would hear her father talking in the yard outside her windows, hear her mother moving about in the kitchen below stairs.

There, over the homemade dressing table at the foot of her bed, was the tall mirror that her father had framed and presented to her on her tenth birthday. There, at the windows, billowing in the cool dawn breeze were the pretty checked gingham curtains, her mother's gift on that same festive occasion.

Then, as she rubbed her eyes and sat up, the last vestige of the illusion vanished. The mirror had peeled and blackened so that her reflection in it was distorted out of all resemblance to a human countenance; the pretty checked gingham curtains hung in pathetic rags and tatters—and both her father and mother were dead.

Her father's grave was at the base of a towering pinnacle of rock, shaded by a majestic grove of cottonwoods; he had lain in it nearly nine years now. But it was less than six months since Mary Lou had buried her mother, in the trim little cemetery in the trim little town some hundreds of miles away, where they had moved from Yellow Buttes because Mary Lou must have a proper education.

The money to pay for it and for the

support of the girl and her mother had come from the sale of the F L Bar to Frank Larson, her father's half-brother. Neither Mary Lou nor her mother had ever seen Frank Larson until after Fred Marshall's death. They knew nothing about him, except the fact that such a person existed. Fred Marshall seldom spoke of him, and when he did, it was merely to say that he hadn't seen Frank in a good many years and didn't know where he was.

Frank had turned up, shortly after the funeral, with condolences, advice, and a plentiful supply of ready cash. The advice coincided with that which Mrs. Marshall had already received from many of her friends: That she would do well to dispose of the ranch at the first decent offer she received for it, because a lone woman could never run an outfit of that size and make it pay. And a substantial sum of Frank Larson's ready cash had been paid over to Fred Marshall's widow for the ranch.

She had been glad to take a mortgage at six per cent for the balance; and while Mary Lou was growing up, she had never had to complain that the interest on the amount was not paid regularly, until a little over a year before the girl's unheralded visit to her old home.

Then, instead of the money, a letter had come with a plaint of hard times, drought, and low prices for beef cattle. But by then, Mary Lou was teaching; her salary was ample for the simple needs of the small family; and Mrs. Marshall had written that Fred's brother needn't worry; he could take another six months' time, and welcome.

He had taken more than nine months and he had made no mention of any intent to pay up on the arrears of interest due when he wrote a brief note in reply to Mary Lou's letter telling him of her mother's death. She hadn't reminded him of his delinquency; but when she was on her way to spend the summer with a schoolmate, and found that her train was scheduled to pass through Yellow Buttes, she had impulsively decided to stop off. Partly because she wanted a business talk with her uncle, but more particularly because there had been growing upon her an urgent desire to revisit her childhood home. And so, as eager and thrilled and excited as when, a shy child in her eleventh year, she had gone to "the city" to live, she had sent Frank Larson a telegram announcing her impending arrival for a short stay at the F L Bar.

Her memory of the man had been rather negative. She recalled him as comparatively young, active, very anxious to be friendly and helpful to his half-brother's widow and child, and not bad looking. The moment she saw him waiting on the station platform, however, she realized that he had changed, and not for the better. He was untidy in his dress; he had grown fleshy and heavy of feature, and had coarsened in every way. Moreover, in spite of his efforts to appear glad to see her and make her welcome, Mary Lou could not overcome an uneasy feeling that his affection was assumed, and the heartiness of his welcome a hollow counterfeit.

Which, of course, might be due to that debt which he owed her; and she had intended to assure him, as soon as she could, that she did not mean to press for payment; he could take his own time. But the tragedy at the Top Notch Corral had driven the whole matter from her mind; and at the F L Bar after supper, when she would have liked to bring it up, she couldn't, somehow, seem to get the conversation around to it.

It isn't the easiest thing in the world to talk to a man who has nothing to say for himself, and who mumbles, "Huh? What's that, Mary Lou?" every time you ask him a question and seems not to hear you even when you repeat it. To say the least, Frank Larson had seemed abstracted and absent-minded all the evening, no doubt because of the dreadful death of his foreman, Jake

DAVE PETRIE

Belden, whom he appeared to have held in the very highest regard. No one could have expected him to be merry and bright in the circumstances; Mary Lou wasn't exactly merry and bright herself.

His relief was quite obvious when she said she was going to retire, and he rose with alacrity. His gruff voice was almost pleasant as she said goodnight and begged her to overlook any fault in the housekeeping arrangements at the F L Bar. Now, if she'd only given them notice a day or so in advance, they could have spruced the house up a bit for her. A bachelor's home was pretty apt to be rough and ready, and so she mustn't be too critical. And he hopeo she'd sleep well.

She hadn't. She was really tired, and the bed was very comfortable. But she had slept lightly and by fits and starts, waking at the slightest sound or at no sound at all. She tossed and dozed and dreamed for seemingly interminable ages of darkness; and, in all her dreams, the face of Slim Chester smiled at her, or she saw it as the set and terrifying bronze mask that it had worn when he had murdered her uncle's foreman, Jake Belden.

Mary Lou had awakened suddenly and looked at her watch. The hands pointed to a quarter past midnight. In all her healthy young life, the girl had never known a night to drag on so interminably. She adjusted the blankets, plumped up the pillow, and then sat bolt upright in bed, listening.

But it was only her uncle's voice that she heard, in the living-room which was directly under her bedroom. He was talking to some late caller who spoke with a pronounced nasal twang, wholly different from the slurred softness of the Southwest speech. Mary Lou couldn't make out the words. She didn't try to. She tried to go to sleep. And, this time, she succeeded. Lulled, perhaps, by that nasal twang with the deep, resonant bass of Frank Larson's voice for accompaniment, she finally drifted off, and slept sound until the eastern sky flaunted streamers of rose and gold.

The brightening glow of the dawn revealed much in the room that had been invisible in the dim lamplight the night before. Nothing had changed and everything was changed. The furniture was the same and still stood in the same positions as she remembered it; but, as with the mirror and the window curtain, time had had its way.

Cowwebs hung from the ceiling, and trailed in long festoons across the rafters. A mouse had made its nest on the floor in the corner. It was a long-unused room; a fusty, unpleasant smelling room; she couldn't bear it. The years between had been too many. . . .

She dressed herself in her riding boots and breeches and went down stairs. Early as she was, her uncle had been earlier. He had already had his breakfast and ridden off somewhere about the business of the ranch. Where to, the slant-eyed Chinese who served her, couldn't say. And he couldn't say when Frank Larson would be back, either. "Might be dinner time, might be supper time, might be late night, Missy; Wo Sing no know."

Wo Sing was not clean. Unlike a Chinese, he was filthy. And so were the coarse dishes, the table, and the floor and walls of the room. Mary

Lou tried to shut her eyes to the dirt and disorder. She hurried through her breakfast, and went out doors. Here, at least, things wouldn't have been allowed to run down.

But they had. An addition had been built onto the bunkhouse, but even it showed signs of disrepair and so did the outbuildings. The whole place looked neglected, down-at-the-heels. Surely it had not been that way in her father's time—piles of rusty tin cans in the yard, shutters swinging loose or hanging from one hinge, the gate with no hinges at all, sagging awry.

Perhaps, Mary Lou told herself, her recollections had been rose-colored, like those of the grown man who revisits "the ole swimmin' hole" after a lapse of years, and finds that he has been fondly cherishing in his memory a scrap of mosquito-ridden swamp.

Or perhaps her disappointment and depression were really an aftermath of the day before. How could she be anything but depressed and unhappy after seeing such an exhibition of ruthless brutality?

A gallop over the range in the fresh morning air appealed to her; it would refresh her and help her to shake off her mood. Her uncle had told her that there was a small saddle in the harness room she could use and, in the corral, a sorrel gelding which was gentle and easy-gaited.

She was walking across the yard toward the corral when, for the first time, she noticed two men lounging in the shade of the bunkhouse wall. They were watching her and talking together in undertones, and one of them laughed in a coarse way that made her flush uncomfortably. It was pretty evident that, whatever the comments in which English Bill and Dave Petrie were indulging about the niece of their boss, they weren't of a sort that would be considered complimentary by any decent woman.

Petrie, with some remark that elicited a chuckle of ribald mirth from English Bill, strolled after the girl, overtaking her at the gate of the small corral, and sweeping off his sombrero in an elaborately ceremonious bow.

"Howdy, Miss Mary Lou. Nice, pretty mornin', ma'am. Don't know's I recollect any nicer mornin' for a long spell. Not too hot, not too cold; just right for a ride. I was thinkin' I'd like a little canter myself, and I sure would admire to go along with you, Miss Mary Lou."

It was, of course, by the purest coincidence that part of Dave Petrie's speech was phrased in almost the same words that Slim Chester had used the day before. They brought certain shocking scenes of that day back so vividly to Mary Lou that for a moment no words came to her. At last she said:

"Thank you, Mr. Petrie. I hope you won't think I'm ungracious, but I'd planned to take a little ramble by myself."

"Think you ungracious? Bless you!" His smile would have been agreeable, except that the line of his thin lips twisted it until it was almost a sneer. "Why, now, Miss Mary Lou, a girl as pretty as you are just couldn't be ungracious if she tried! But as for ramblin' off by yourself, you wouldn't want to go and make a poor lonely cowpoke plumb miserable by tellin' him he couldn't ride along, would you?"

If Mary Lou Marshall had known the man well, she wouldn't have minded his telling her she was a pretty girl. But she didn't know him well. She had seen him only once before in her life, and she didn't like him at all. The intended gallantry became an offense. The fellow's free-and-easy manner was an offense and it made no difference that his hawk-like face was almost handsome, and that he was tall and spare and powerfully built. Mary Lou drew herself up—and when she chose, this daughter of the Western plains could be as icily haughty in her dignity as any Boston blue-blood.

"I tried to make you understand that I preferred to take my ride alone, sir,"

she said coldly. "Apparently I didn't succeed. Let me try again. I do not wish you to go with me. Is that quite clear?"

But Dave Petrie seemed wholly unimpressed. He grinned at her as if she and he were sharing some rather questionable joke.

"You wouldn't kid a feller, now would you, Mary Lou? Say, you don't have to put on the skittish filly act with me. I understand all about girls, and you're just my style. What say I show you a nice quiet place I know about where you and me can be sociable and get acquainted in no time a-tall? It ain't so very far from here, and we—"

"Uncle Frank, this man is annoying me," the girl called in a clear, carrying voice to Frank Larson who had just ridden in through the yard gateway. That too-familiar "Mary Lou" of Petrie's had made her almost as angry as his impudent assumption that she was merely being coy when she had declined his escort. "Will you please come here and put him in his place? He seems not to know it."

"What's this now? Petrie annoyin' you?" Larson spurred his lathered mount over to the corral. "What the devil do you mean by botherin' my niece, Dave Petrie?"

"Aw, now, boss, I wasn't meanin' no harm," Petrie mumbled. "Miss Marshall, she misunderstood me, that's all. I only wanted to be friendly. I'll be glad to ask her pardon if I said anythin' she took wrong. And I do ask it. I'm real sorry."

But Mary Lou was not going to let him off as easily as that. "I did not misunderstand, Uncle Frank," she said flatly. "This fellow was impertinent and offensive. He refused to take no for an answer when I told him I didn't want him to ride with me. He wasn't trying to be friendly; he was insulting. He disgusted me."

"So!" said Frank Larson. "Got fresh, did he? Well, he won't do it again. Petrie, you go pack your war bag and get the hell off this ranch. Make it snappy! No back-talk, neither. Move!"

He turned to Mary Lou, who thought that Dave Petrie had got exactly what was coming to him, and who hadn't seen Larson's wink which made the dismissal a farce.

"Sorry I got to rush right off again, Mary Lou," Frank said, as Petrie left them and went into the bunkhouse. "But I've got a tip where that dirty killer, Slim Chester, has hid himself. Me and some of the boys are goin' to see to it he doesn't take it on the lam before a posse ketches him. He's a dang slippery cuss, Chester is, but we'll fetch him in, dead or alive; he won't get away from us today like he done yesterday. . . . Here, I'll get your hoss whiles Bill's gettin' his. You ain't forgot how to saddle up, have you?"

English Bill had come over to the corral with his gear over his shoulder. He gave Mary Lou a most respectful nod as he passed her, and proceeded to rope his horse and a fresh mount for Larson while the latter was coaxing the sorrel gelding to the gate. They were mounted and galloping away in a northerly direction before the girl had her saddle in place and had adjusted the stirrups to the proper length. Purposely, she dawdled over the simple task, because she didn't want her uncle to know where she was going.

In his anxiety to be off after "that dirty killer, Slim Chester," he had probably taken it for granted that she intended to ride around the ranch. And she had an altogether different destination in view. Perhaps in the place where she had once spent so many happy hours with her father, she could recapture some of the spell of those precious childhood memories.

Larson and English Bill were out of sight when she mounted the sorrel and headed almost due east over the rolling prairie, toward the foot-hills. "We'll fetch him in, dead or alive." More violence. More hatred. More brutality. Where was the peace that she had known and loved and had come

back to the F L Bar to find? Slim Chester was a dangerous criminal, of course. But, somehow, it seemed terrible that he should be tracked and killed as if he were a wild beast.

His eyes had been so blue, his smile so charming and boyish. Mary Lou sighed sharply. Then she took herself sternly to task. Dave Petrie had also said that it was a mighty pretty morning. She remembered that her father had once remarked that you couldn't tell from looking at the shell what kind of egg was inside it. If Slim Chester were caught, the law would have to take its course with him. She felt a little ashamed that she had dreamed of him the night before. A killer. A dangerous criminal, to be shot if he resisted arrest. But, she did so hate violence.

"Oh, I'm a sentimental little fool," she told herself, and sent the sorrel ahead at a faster pace. I should never have come back to Yellow Buttes. I might have known everything would be different. I'll get away as soon as I can think of a reasonable excuse."

Scarcely had she vanished from sight beyond the first of the long, undulating swells of the plain when Dave Petrie emerged from the bunkhouse, and ran around to a saddled horse that had been hitched behind the building. He was laughing to himself as he rode off in the same direction the girl had taken.

CHAPTER VIII

A Fugitive from Justice

WHEN SLIM CHESTER had asked the president of the Cattleman's Bank and Trust Company to tell the sheriff that he would be found at White Water Canyon in the morning, he had meant, and he had known that Black Jack Hammond would know he had meant, not the big main canyon itself, but a comparatively small box canyon at the upper end, among the foothills.

Here were the falls, cold and crystal clear, plunging over a high lip of stone into a natural basin, the outlet of which, a broad, shallow stream, narrowed and deepened at the bottle-neck mouth of the canyon, sweeping along between its confining walls in a rainbow smother of foam and flying spray —the rapids of the swift White Water.

A ledge of rock along one wall, well above the racing torrent, offered a perfectly practicable means of entrance to the box canyon through the bottle-neck, to an ideal camping ground. There was no other way in, except down over the almost sheer face of the cliffs.

Slim had spread his blankets on a grassy knoll above the stream, about mid-way between the falls and the rapids. He had slept late and breakfasted at his leisure. He reflected with rather grim amusement that being "a fugitive from justice" was really not half bad.

He was, however, anxious to have his talk with the sheriff, who he knew would give him a clean bill of health in the Jake Belden killing, and who was probably prepared to be specific about the true purpose back of the proposed vigilante organizations. Probably Hammond had already formed definite suspicions as to the identity of the members of the gang responsible for so many of the bold bank robberies in the county, and it would be interesting to cooperate with him. Black Jack Hammond was hard working, conscientious, shrewd, and a live wire. If you were on the level, you had nothing to fear from him. If you were crooked, it was only a question of time before he invited you to produce the ace you'd never dreamed he knew you had up your sleeve!

Slim had just finished washing his frying pan when, faint and far off, he heard the report of a rifle. Instantly, he sent blankets and duffel bag flying into the brush beyond the knoll, and himself dropped down behind a big boulder, where he crouched, alertly listening.

He heard no other shot; but presently his keen ear caught the echo of a horse's hoofs clattering on the shale-strewn floor of the canyon below the rapids, and then the louder, sharper drumming of iron shoes on the solid rock of the ledge above them.

A rider was making for the box canyon at full speed; Slim could see him now and he was not an enemy. Slim sprang from the shelter of the boulder and ran forward as fast as he could to meet him. It was Black Jack Hammond, gray-faced, haggard, reeling in his saddle and clutching at the horn with both hands to keep himself from being thrown.

Slim caught the reins and brought the horse to a stop, easing the sheriff carefully from the animal's back.

"Don't—don't lay me down, Slim. I'm—shot in the lung." The words came in a wheezy gasp, a mere thread of the full, resonant baritone that was the voice of Black Jack Hammond. "Hold me up so I can breathe. I'm done—but I—had to get—to talk—to you."

There was blood on his breeches and on the front of his shirt, but not a great deal. Black Jack Hammond's life was draining away inside that punctured lung. One need not be a doctor to tell that only minutes, and a limited number of them, remained for him.

"Who done it, Jack?" Slim asked, holding the dying man in the hollow of his curved arm. He moisted the dry lips with water, poured some whiskey into the cap of the small emergency flask he always carried and held it for Hammond to drink. "Here, Jack, this'll make you feel better."

"Got to talk—in a hurry." The few drops of whiskey which the sheriff let trickle down his throat seemed to revive him a little. His voice came stronger, but he still breathed in quick, shallow gasps.

"I don't know who done it, Slim. Somebody with a rifle drilled me as I was comin' up the canyon. I didn't see nor hear nothin'. I kept right on ridin'—they'd 've got me if I turned back—and I knew you was here." He made a weak gesture and Slim held the whiskey to his lips again. His voice faded, his breath labored as he went on:

"Likely 'twas Frank Larson or some of his men. Larson, he might've got wind I suspicioned him. He's the head of the gang that's been doin' all the bank robberies."

"Can you prove that, Jack?" Slim asked quickly.

"No. I know he's the man I want, but I ain't been able to ketch him with the goods yet. Been arrangin' things so's all his bunch'd be watched continuous. That's what I wanted you to

ENGLISH BILL

line up for me. Can't trust Newberry; reckon he's in with 'em. Slim, I'm leavin' you to carry on. Get Raymond to help you. I seen him last night. So—so long, Slim!"

The last words came in a gush of bright blood from Black Jack Hammond's bearded lips. His head fell back. His pain-filled eyes rolled up and glazed over. His body relaxed limply in Slim Chester's arms.

Very gently, Slim laid it down on the grass at the base of the boulder.

A brave man, Sheriff Black Jack Hammond; and he was dead from the bullet of a cowardly assassin, fired from ambush. Dead, when his courage and sterling honesty were most needed.

Larson and Newberry—a fine pair to draw to! Slim Chester, who had disliked and distrusted both, wondered why under the sun it had never occurred to him that either might be connected with criminal activities other than occasional rustling or brand blotching. Wondered, too, with the sheriff's dying admonition still ringing in his ears, how, now that Black Jack Hammond was gone, he was going to be able to play the part assigned to him and carry on. The humor of being "a fugitive from justice" had lost all its savor.

Hoofbeats in the canyon sent him to cover again behind a dense mat of brush, his guns ready for instant action. He had no doubt at all that the bushwhacker—Larson or one of his men—was following up the wounded sheriff to make sure of his kill.

Slim was greatly astonished, therefore, when, from his place of concealment, he recognized Mary Lou Marshall, mounted on a sorrel gelding, cantering along the rock ledge and into the box canyon. She was smiling contentedly to herself and humming a little tune. But the smile vanished abruptly when she saw the motionless, bloodstained body of the sheriff lying by the boulder; her lovely face turned pale, and her eyes dilated in wordless horror. She wheeled the sorrel in its tracks and started back to the rocky ledge she had just quitted.

Slim, undecided whether or not to call out to her, had his mind made up for him by the sound of still another rider clattering up the canyon. "Somebody with a rifle," the sheriff had said—and Dave Petrie, jauntily confident of bearing as he came along the ledge, had a rifle in his saddle scabbard.

But he did not know that Slim Chester was in the White Water box canyon; and if his had been the bullet that had pierced Black Jack Hammond's lung he must have been certain that the shot was a fatal one, for he had eyes only for Mary Lou Marshall.

"Ah, there, sweetie!" he saluted her airily. "I figured I'd find you here. I 'don't know my place,' but *you* do—you come right to it!"

She would have ridden past him, but he swung his mount across the end of the ledge and, grinning, reached for her reins. She pulled aside, tried to swerve; but her horse's hoofs slid on the spray-slippery rocks, and in the ensuing scramble to regain its footing, she was unseated and thrown heavily.

She wasn't hurt, but she was jarred and badly shaken; and before she could recover herself, Petrie was out of his saddle and at her side, his arm lifting her and holding her to him.

"Well, here we are—a little ahead of where we left off, baby, and nobody 'round to interrupt our little tatytate this time," said he. "Scratch you, did it? Dave'll kiss the place and make it well."

"Let go of me! Do you hear me? Let go, this instant! Let go!"

Dave Petrie laughed, a thick, chuckling laugh, deep in his throat. There was a hot, red smolder in his eyes; his mouth was loose.

"Let you go? Nix! I picked you for mine first time I seen you and what's mine I take. Stop your wigglin', now, and keep still. Hear me? Keep still, or I'm liable to get real rough with you."

"Let me go!" Mary Lou was struggling, writhing this way and that in a frantic effort to free herself. She was no weakling, but her young strength was as nothing, pitted against Dave Petrie's. She struck at him with all her force; he caught her wrist and laughed again.

"Let me go! Let me go! Oh, please, let me go!" she kept gasping. The plea was automatic; she did not realize that she was crying out. All she knew was that she was utterly helpless and at his mercy.

"You don't want to go, sweetie," he leered at her. "Didn't I tell you down to the ranch I was wise to dames, huh? Be yourself! You're just a-wastin' time. Squirmin' like a fish on a hook ain't goin' to do you no good. You don't want it to do you no good. This here's what you want!" He crushed her against him, and drew his wet mouth across her cheek, excitedly seeking her lips.

Terrified, desperate, she twisted her face away from the revolting contact; and, across his restraining arm, dimly glimsed a tall figure in dusty brown just behind him. Dave Petrie uttered a grunt of pain and relaxed his hold on her as a sinewy hand clamped down on his shoulder and spun him around as easily as if he had been a child's top.

Slim Chester was smiling; but it was not a reassuring sort of smile, and Petrie went chalk-white as he saw it. His jaw dropped and he stood gaping stupidly, as though paralyzed with fear.

"Just a bad boy, ain't you, Petrie?" purred Slim. "Wasn't brought up to know how to behave toward a lady. Well, it ain't never too late to learn, they say. I'm goin' to give you a lesson in deportment you won't forget if you live to grow a beard—which ain't no ways probable, considerin' there ain't no closed season on varmints.

"You get down on your knees and tell Miss Marshall that you're a dirty, low-down cur—so low that you have to look up to see a snake's belly. That when there's a respectable woman 'round, you ought to be gagged, 'cause ary word you speak in her hearin' would be an insult. That you'd lick her boots if you didn't know she'd have to throw 'em away afterwards on account of your touchin' 'em. And you can explain that you ain't tellin' her all this because you're ashamed of yourself, you not knowin' what shame is, but only because you want to save yourself from somethin' worse than a damn good hidin'—which you're goin' to get anyways, no matter what. Commence!"

The shake that accompanied the last command snapped Dave Petrie's head back so that his teeth clicked together like castanets; but it seemed to bring him out of the stupor of terror that had held him as if in a state of suspended animation. Common sense should have told him that he was as helpless in Slim's grasp as the girl had been in his; but his mind was not directed by common sense.

Slim's right hand was still clamped over his shoulder; both his own hands were dangling at his sides. It needed only a flick of his wrist for him to jerk his gun from its holster. But at the barely perceptible twitch of the muscles that started the movement, Slim's left hand darted out and seized his wrist. At the same time, Slim laid the barrel of his other gun along the side of Petrie's head with stunning force; and the fellow crumpled in his track, like an empty suit of clothes, sprawling senseless on the grass.

CHAPTER IX

What to Believe?

WIPING the blood from his gun barrel with a bunch of leaves, Slim slid the weapon into its holster, and turned to Mary Lou Marshall. Overwhelming relief at her rescue from Petrie, no less than the hideous terror she had endured during those few brief moments when she had believed herself to be alone with him, had wholly unnerved the girl. She was trembling all over. Great choking sobs were wrenching at her throat, racking her slender body from head to foot, and tears of reaction were streaming down her face.

"It's all over now, ma'am," Slim told her reassuringly. "Everything's all over, and you're safe and sound. He won't bother you no more, I'll guarantee that. Don't you go takin' on so; you'll make yourself sick."

Mary stretched out her hands to him, as she might have stretched them out to a strong and kindly elder brother. And like a brother, sympathetic and undertsanding, he drew her into his arms, pillowing her head on his breast. She clung to him in almost hysterical abandon.

"There, there, honey, don't you cry that a-way," he soothed her, his fingers stroking her tumbled hair. "It's all over, and you ain't hurt a mite. Pull yourself together, like the brave girl you are. There, there. Dry your eyes and pretend it's just a bad dream you've waked up from. There, there. You're all right, honey."

The gentleness of Slim's voice, the magnetic touch of his fingers on her hair, the clasp of his arms that was at once so strong and so protectively tender, comforted and calmed her. Gradually, the hard, racking sobs softened, came less often, until they ceased altogether. The hysterical clutch of her fingers loosened; she lifted her head and fumbled in her pocket for her handkerchief.

Slim gave her his, and she dabbed at her wet eyes with it. "Yes; I—I am all right, thanks to you," she quavered. "And I'm sorry I went to pieces. Only I was so horribly frightened. I don't know what to say to you—how to tell you how grate—"

"You don't have to say a thing to me or tell me a thing," Slim interrupted. "And what girl wouldn't have went to pieces, I'd like to know?" It was so thrillingly sweet to hold her in his arms that he would have liked to keep her there indefinitely; but she no longer needed his support and, reluctantly, he released her. "Wouldn't you like for me to get you a drink of water, mebbe?" he asked diffidently.

"P-presently." She did not seem to be in any hurry to draw away from him, and when he led her a little distance back into the box canyon, where the bank of the river was low and grassy, she stood with one hand tightly clasping his arm, as if she felt a sense of security in his nearness. "Just for a little while, I don't want to do anything, only be quiet until I'm myself again." In the most natural way in the world, she pressed her forehead against his shoulder and closed her eyes. "I reckon I was so scared, I didn't know what I was doing at all. I was running away, you know, and—"

"Runnin' away?" Slim exclaimed. "Runnin' away from what?"

"From the F L Bar, my uncle's ranch. It used to be my father's. I lived there when I was a little girl. But it had changed so much— I rode up here because I knew the White Water would be the same way I remembered it. I wanted to enjoy it, by myself. And he—he must have followed me."

"How about lettin' me spread a blanket in the shade up by the Falls?" Slim interposed with diplomatic haste, as a shudder went over her. "You can sit and rest there right comfortable, and I'll fetch you a pan o' water so's you can bathe your eyes."

"You think they aren't wet enough now?" She laughed, a very shaky little laugh. "After I've simply soaked your handkerchief. And cried all over the front of your clean shirt?"

"Miss Mary Lou, every other shirt I've got is goin' to turn grass-green with envy," Slim declared, adding whimsically as the girl's lips quivered into a shy smile that was sweet and charming and confidently friendly, "And it's mebbe lucky I run away myself yesterday, or I wouldn't 've been here when you showed up."

Yesterday. . . . Mary Lou's face changed. She had forgotten yesterday and, for a few minutes, a short, shocking interval of today. Now it all came back to her clearly, dreadfully. Her gaze went toward the base of the boulder, where the body of Black Jack Hammond lay—fixed on the five-pointed metal star pinned to his vest.

"That man over there. Isn't he an officer of the law?"

"He was," Slim corrected grimly. "Up to about fifteen minutes ago, he

was the sheriff of this county, and a mighty good friend of mine. I left word with Mr. Raymond at the bank for him to let the sheriff know where he could find me this mornin'. Oh, I know what's in your mind, Mary Lou, but you're mistaken. It ain't your fault that you've got off on the wrong foot about all this; you just don't understand."

"I understand that you wouldn't surrender to Marshal Newberry yesterday," Mary Lou said slowly. "You wouldn't submit to arrest at the corral, though you had committed—" She checked herself.

"Committed murder, you were goin' to say," Slim finished for her quietly. "I'm tellin' you again, Mary Lou, the same as I told you then, I didn't commit a murder. I did shoot a murderer —Jake Belden. You wouldn't listen to me when I tried to explain; but there ain't an open-minded, honest man who knows the facts that won't agree I was justified."

"The marshal didn't seem to think so! He ordered you to give up your guns and go to the jail with him, didn't he?"

"Yeah, with him and three of Jake Belden's pals. I just had to buffalo one of 'em for layin' hands on you, Mary Lou. Don't you believe for one little minute that I was worryin' 'bout Marshal Newberry. He ain't—"

"But what am I to believe?" Mary Lou cried wretchedly. "I saw you defy and hold up one officer of the law yesterday. Today, I find you in this lonely place with his superior—the sheriff—dead."

"And you're thinkin' I killed him. I didn't. He'd been shot through the lung when he was on his way up the canyon to meet me, and he was already dyin' when he got here."

"If you didn't shoot him, who did?"

"I don't know. All he could tell me was that he'd been bushwhacked. It's my guess, though, 'twas Dave Petrie."

Slim could plainly see the bewildered incredulity of the girl, and he was fair-minded enough to appreciate it. His story seemed too utterly fantastic. He couldn't blame her for doubting it. Nor, he was sure, would it be made to sound any more plausible by bringing in Frank Larson's name. For him to accuse Mary Lou's own uncle of being directly responsible for the killing of Black Jack Hammond would do nothing but confirm her already strong suspicions that he himself had perpetrated the crime.

Actually, Mary Lou could not make up her mind what to believe. Her heart and her head were at war. She had been attracted to Slim from the first and he had just done her a tremendous service, for which she was profoundly grateful. He seemed so straight-forward and frank and likable. Emotionally she rebelled at the thought that he could really be a cowardly, ruthless killer.

Yet there was the evidence of her own eyes and ears in the slaying of Jake Belden. There was the fact, impossible to ignore, that the sheriff, coming to the White Water—probably with a warrant in his pocket—had died there from a gun-shot wound, alone with Slim Chester, who was a fugitive with a charge of murder hanging over him.

And there were those two big black-butted guns in their tied-down holsters. One had been added since the day before. Did a peaceful, honest ranchman with a conscience clear of wrong doing need two guns to establish his innocence in a law-abiding community such as Yellow Buttes?

What, oh, what to believe? Mary Lou Marshall didn't know; and in the distress of her indecision, she stood with eyes averted, miserably twisting and untwisting Slim's handkerchief about her fingers.

Suddenly, without the slightest warning, a rifle cracked sharply from the top of the canyon rim. Slim Chester's head went back. He staggered and fell at her feet, blood pouring in a gush over his ghastly face.

CHAPTER X

Mary Lou Buys Chips

THROUGH the thick growth of brush and chaparral on the precipitous wall of the box canyon near the falls, two men were visible, scrambling down from the rim rock over the steeply slanting slope. Mary Lou recognized her uncle and English Bill. She dropped to her knees beside Slim, her heart like lead within her, but her fingers deft and steady as she felt his pulse and then made a hurried examination of his wound.

To her intense joy, she found the injury to be comparatively superficial, although it was bleeding so freely as to appear very serious. The rifle bullet had made a long gash in the scalp back of the temple, but it had not penetrated deep enough to fracture the bone.

Frank Larson and English Bill came running along the edge of the river bank.

"Well, the hellion's got his this time, all right, Bill," the F L Bar owner declared jubilantly. "His cussedness has finally caught up with him and a damn' good job for everybody, too. I hope I ain't what you'd call a vindictive man, but I'm glad he's done for."

Mary Lou had dipped Slim's handkerchief into the shallow water and was endeavoring to staunch the flow of blood from his head.

"He's not done for, Uncle Frank," she said. "He's got a nasty scalp wound and he's unconscious, but he isn't dead."

"He ain't?" exclaimed English Bill and bent to peer more closely at the senseless man. "Hell, Frank, what you done was only crease him! It weren't no real good finished job a-tall, but it mighty soon will be. Look outa the way, ma'am." He reached for his six-gun.

Mary Lou's protest was instant and outraged. "Don't you dare!" she cried, throwing herself forward, so that her own body shielded Slim's from the gunman. "Don't you dare!"

"And why not?" English Bill demanded, scowling. "Ain't they a reward out for him, dead or alive? We ain't takin' no more chances. I'm goin' to settle his hash for keeps—now."

"Bill's right, Mary Lou," Larson rumbled. "You get up and leave that skunk be. We'll tend to him. Just you walk on back to the falls and forget it. This ain't a woman's job."

"A woman's job?" echoed the girl scornfully, her uplifted eyes flashing in indignation. "Is it a *man's?*"

"Well, you ain't got no call to take sides with a murderer," English Bill growled. "It was poor old Jake Belden yesterday, and today's it's the sheriff. There ain't goin' to be nobody tomorrow. Will you move like your uncle told you, or do we have to make you, huh?"

For answer, the girl snatched one of Slim's guns from its holster and leveled it at English Bill's stomach. The forty-five was heavy and she was not accustomed to handling a weapon of so large a caliber. But even if the muzzle did waver a little, she could hardly miss a target at little more than arm's length from her.

"Maybe he is a murderer," she said, and was vaguely surprised at the calmness of her voice. "But it hasn't been proved yet. Whatever he's done, he's entitled to a fair trial and I'll see that he gets it! I'm not taking sides, but he's not going to be shot by you or anybody else while he's wounded and helpless."

"Put that gun down, Mary Lou!" Larson almost shouted. "Put it down this minute! It's liable to go off and hurt Bill bad."

"It sure is if he tries to harm this man!" Mary Lou said crisply. "There's a jail in Yellow Buttes. Neither Slim Chester nor the reward money's likely to run away. If you want me to put this gun down, you'll have to give me your word of honor that you'll take

him to town and turn him safely over to the marshal—personally."

"Now, Mary Lou, you just don't—"

"Then, if he's guilty, he'll pay the penalty, according to law. But he told me himself that he didn't kill the sheriff—that someone in the main canyon did the shooting."

"Huh! That's a likely story, that is!" scoffed Frank Larson. "I'd give you credit for more sense than to swallow it, Mary Lou. Why, you could see for yourself 'twas a lie. Wasn't you right here at the White Water when Chester plugged Hammond?"

Quite without craft or guile herself, the girl did not understand that the question was a "feeler," designed to draw from her how much of the truth she actually knew. She answered frankly.

"Why, no; of course not. Sheriff Hammond was dead when I saw him. I don't know who killed him or when or why. It ought not to be very hard to find out, though. When Slim Chester comes to, he can tell his story to the proper authorities. At the jail, meanwhile, nobody's going to take the law into his own hands. I mean it, Uncle Frank."

"Yeah; I reckon you do, Mary Lou. And I reckon you're in the right of it, after all, too," Larson said. He made the admission grudgingly, as if the girl had really persuaded him. "I'll give you my word, and I'll guarantee Bill will abide by the strict letter of the law. Won't you, Bill?"

"Sure, boss, sure. Anythin' you say goes with me," English Bill nodded, wiping away a grin with the back of his hand. "Now, if you'll just put that gun down now, ma'am, I'd be mighty thankful. And you ain't goin' to object to your uncle relievin' him of his other smoke-pole afore he does us a mischief with it, are you?"

"Of course, she ain't," Larson said heartily. "She knows he's liable to let daylight through the both of us when he comes to. . . . You've got my word or honor and Bill's, too, Mary Lou."

The girl could raise no reasonable objection to Larson's disarming Slim, but she kept the gun she had taken. Although she believed implicitly that her uncle would adhere to the promise he had given her—and, quite ingenuously, that her argument had convinced him—she didn't trust English Bill at all. She was sure that he hadn't been convinced; he had only pretended to be. She felt that her possession of a revolver was a far better guarantee that Slim would be safely turned over to the marshal of Yellow Buttes than English Bill's hypocritical agreement.

"We'd better tie him up while we're about it, too," continued Larson. "He's a dang slippery cuss, Slim Chester is, and we don't know how many of his crooked pals is in on this with him. 'Sides, he couldn't noways stay on the back of a hoss 'less'n he was roped to the saddle, him bein' outa the picture. Fetch Hammond's rope over here, Bill, and then go round up Chester's bronc."

As a matter of fact, Slim wasn't "outa the picture." Consciousness had returned to him, though he was weak and dazed and his head was aching intolerably. As through a heavy fog, he had heard Mary Lou's spirited defense of him, understood, dimly, that she had saved him from immediate death at the hands of Larson and English Bill. But by the time the enveloping mists had cleared from his senses, he had been disarmed; he couldn't even put up a fight against odds.

It might, he decided, be the wisest thing to simulate unconsciousness while his captors were taking him to the jail at Yellow Buttes. If he were to escape alive from his present plight, it must be by the use of his wits.

So he kept his eyes closed and his muscles limply relaxed, while Larson and English Bill bound his wrists behind his back, hoisted him roughly into his saddle, and lashed his ankles together under his horse's belly. It wasn't easy and it wasn't comfortable to sit slumped over like a half empty meal

sack; but, Slim ruminated with biting self-contempt, he had his own rank carelessness to thank and nothing else. He had neglected the most elementary precautions against being caught off guard. Now, his only chance—if, indeed, he had any chance—seemed to be to play 'possum, whereby he might manage to get a word with Mary Lou and induce her to try to get in touch with some of his friends.

It was good strategy; but, in the end, he got his opportunity to speak to the girl principally because of the shortage of horses—there weren't enough to go 'round. The sorrel could not carry double, and Black Jack Hammond's body, blanket-wrapped, was strapped to its saddle. The sheriff's horse, a powerful, raw-boned beast, was far more capable of bearing the weight of two men than was Slim's. As Slim was presumably "outa the picture," Larson assumed that Mary Lou could safely share his mount—especially as she would be under the close observation of himself and English Bill.

The girl made no protest at the arrangement. She had bound up Slim's head as well as she could, making a compress of his wet handkerchief and using his and her own bandannas to hold it in place. They were just ready to start when, from the tangle of brush near the ledge along the rapids, Dave Petrie emerged and reeled toward them.

"Petrie! What the hell are you doin' here?" ejaculated the F L Bar owner. "And what in blazes has happened to you?"

Petrie was still too groggy to give a coherent explanation; but in a few curt sentences, Mary Lou supplied it. Larson was wroth.

"Why the devil didn't you tell me this before, Mary Lou?"

"I'm sorry, Uncle Frank, but I completely forgot about him," the girl said simply. "So much has happened—"

"You'd ought to have remembered about his hoss, anyways. It's still here in the canyon somewheres, ain't it?"

"Why, yes, I reckon it is."

"All right, then. That'll make it easier for us. Bill, you go find Dave's bronc. Make it snappy. He ain't so bad hurt but what he can sashay up to the rim rock where we had to leave our cayuses, and meet us down the canyon with 'em. And that's what he's goin' to do. I'll just have a word with him in case he feels he ain't able to do no climbin'. Petrie, what did I say to you at the ranch, huh? Didn't I tell you—"

It was while English Bill was bringing up the extra horse, and Larson was pretending to give the bruised and battered Petrie a thorough hauling over the coals, that Slim got his chance to speak unnoticed to Mary Lou.

"It's my turn to say 'thank you,' Mary Lou," he said, in a guarded undertone. "What's left of my life, I owe to you."

"What's left of your life, Slim?" She kept her own voice low. "But your wound's not serious. You won't die from it."

"No, but whether you realize it or not, my chips'll be cashed in the first minute you take your eyes off me."

"I reckon I know: English Bill. Well, I'm not going to take my eyes off you until you're safely lodged in the jail at Yellow Buttes, with Marshal Newberry to see that you get a square deal."

It was on the tip of Slim's tongue to tell her that Sam Newberry would probably be quite interested in seeing that he didn't get a square deal. But before he could form the words, Larson, having finished his loud-voiced castigation of Dave Petrie, turned around to them, and there was no chance for further speech.

And presently the little cavalcade started along the ledge and down the main canyon, English Bill riding ahead and leading the sorrel with the body of the sheriff, Slim and Mary Lou coming next, and Larson, on Petrie's horse, bringing up the rear.

Slim was wretchedly uncomfortable, and in acute pain; but never for a sec-

ond did he forget his rôle. He played it so convincingly that Mary Lou was afraid he had relapsed into unconsciousness; and even Larson's sharp eyed vigilance was relaxed for an occasional short interval.

It was during one of these intervals that Slim, through slitted eyelids, saw what he had been looking for ever since they had left the White Water, yet had scarcely dared hope to find: a dried brownish spot on the flank of a rounded gray boulder. Here was proof—she liked the evidence of her own eyes!—that he hadn't lied to her; proof positive and incontrovertible, if only she could be made to understand it.

He spoke in a whisper out of the corner of his mouth, without moving his lips, pressing his fettered hands against her knee.

"Mary Lou, don't turn your head and don't let on I'm talkin' to you. Act like you hadn't noticed a thing, but look there, on the leaves of that mesquite we're comin' too. Look on the side of that big yellow rock, on the sand below it. Careful!"

On the leaves of the mesquite was a splatter of dull red drops. On the side of the big yellow rock, a splash of brighter crimson was still moist at its lower edge, where a narrowing liquid stream had trickled down over the irregular slab and been absorbed by the thirsty sand.

She instantly grasped its significance. "Why, that's where Sheriff Hammond was shot! I must tell—"

"Hush! That's just what you mustn't do—tell anybody, now."

"But, Slim, it absolutely proves you spoke the truth! I ought to tell Uncle Frank right away—set him straight."

"No! Don't let him or anybody suspicion it. Understand? Go straight to Dan Halpern in Yellow Buttes—tell him everything. Say for him to see Mr. Raymond, quick. Raymond'll know what to do."

"But why not tell my uncle, now, Slim?"

"Because I want you as well as me to get to town alive, Mary Lou! Hush!"

Then, for the first time, her doubts of Slim Chester tottered, her faith in him was fortified and she began to wonder what was wrong about Frank Larson. She asked herself what Slim Chester suspected or knew of the man, that she mustn't tell the truth now, because he wanted "you as well as me to get to town alive."

CHAPTER XI

"The Inside Story"

EVEN after Dave Petrie joined them with the other two horses, the progress of the little party down the canyon was slow. It was late in the afternoon when they approached Yellow Buttes. Larson called a halt in a clump of scrub oak some distance from the town, explaining that he wanted to wait until it was darker, to minimize the risk they would run in taking the prisoner through the streets to the jail.

"I'll feel a sight more comfortable when he's safe behind bars, Mary Lou," he said solemnly. "Then he's the law's responsibility. He ain't none too well liked hereabouts; and if the word gets out that he killed Black Jack Hammond—we ain't never had a sheriff as popular as Hammond, you see—before we've turned him over to Newberry and got him locked up, we might have a tough time. He'd be took away from us and strung up to the nearest cottonwood and nobody'd give a damn whether he'd had a legal trial or not."

"He'll swing anyways, after he has had a trial," growled English Bill. "Might better 've let me finish the job back there at the White Water, and saved a lot of trouble and expense. Just s'pose he was to wake up and yell for help from some of his gang whiles we're waltzin' him in? We'd have one sweet-scented row!"

"He ain't goin' to do no yellin' for help, Bill," promised Larson. "He tries

it, and I'll slap a gag into his mouth, quick!"

Slim didn't try it. He did stir and moan a bit, and finally open pain-drugged, bloodshot eyes, when by way of dark, unfrequented streets, his captors led his horse up to the door of the adobe jail, a narrow, dirty building wedged in between two others with high false fronts. It was time to wake up, time to whisper urgently to the girl to "get out of Yellow Buttes first minute you can," not time to raise any disturbance. So he only mumbled and muttered as, surrounded by his enemies, he was dragged across the sidewalk, and delivered to a very important and still more nervous marshal. Two deputies, strangers to Mary Lou, thrust the prisoner into a cell.

Larson conferred briefly aside with Newberry, then turned to his men.

"We've done our duty," said he, "and angels couldn't do no more. I'll send Stub Dilly to fetch Hammond's body and take it to the undertaker's. Wouldn't do much talkin', was I you, fellers; the marshal's agin it. Now, Mary Lou, my dear, how about a bite of supper? And then I'll send some of the boys out to the ranch with you. I can't get away myself right now, but you'd ought to be startin'."

But Mary Lou Marshall shook her head. She had tacitly promised Slim that she would see Dan Halpern, and she couldn't see Halpern if she were out at the F L Bar. Besides, she had had quite enough of "the boys"; nothing would have induced her to accept the escort of any of them anywhere.

"I'm not hungry, Uncle Frank, but I am dreadfully tired. I just don't feel up to riding that long way. If you don't mind, I'd like to get a room at the hotel and go straight to bed. I need sleep more than anything else. I reckon I'm about all in."

"And no wonder, my dear. But you best have 'em send a snack up to your room; you'll sleep better for it. And first thing in the mornin', I'll come take you home. You just try and forget all that's happened today, Mary Lou. It's been terrible hard on you—what with Petrie, and then that dirty murderer and all."

"Uncle Frank, what makes you so positive that Slim Chester actually did kill the sheriff?" she asked hesitantly. "He said he didn't. He said Black Jack Hammond was a good friend of his."

Larson looked around, as if to be sure that no one was within earshot, and then came up close to the girl's side.

"Listen, Mary Lou, and I'll tell you the inside story to set your mind at rest. But don't you repeat what I say, 'cause it's between me and the authorities. It won't come out till Chester's trial. It's this a-way: Black Jack Hammond come to the ranch last night after everybody'd gone to bed. He didn't want even the boys to know he was there, so he waited till just about midnight to talk to me personal. He told me he'd been mighty suspicious of Chester for a long time. He'd been keepin' an eye on him and his doin's, and he'd finally tracked a crooked job down to him and his pals."

"Oh!" said Mary Lou faintly.

"He'd found out Chester was hidin' up to the White Water, and he was goin' to bring him in and make him stand his trial. I told Jack he hadn't ought to go alone, that he'd best take a posse with him. But he wouldn't hear to it. He was afraid somebody'd tip the cuss off."

"But why did the sheriff come to you, Uncle Frank?"

Frank Larson patted her cold, shaking little hand.

"Chester kind of made a hit with you, what with his good looks and his smooth tongue and all, didn't he? That's his line—smooth as soft soap. Nor he don't look like a killer. But he is. Mary Lou, the sheriff come to me because I'm one of the men who's been watchin' that S Bar C ranch for him. He wanted my report. And he wanted my help, to see to it that Chester didn't give him the slip today.

"He didn't tell nobody else, not even Sam Newberry, how he'd finally got the proof that Chester was heading up this here gang of bank robbers. They've been pullin' stick-ups all over the county— There! I shouldn't 've mentioned that, Mary Lou; it's a secret between me and the county authorities. But I know you won't tell."

He patted her hand again.

"Chester, he figured Hammond would play a lone hand, like he 'most always does. With Hammond dead, he could likely wiggle clear, see? He didn't suspicion I already knowed what was what, or that Hammond had come to me in the middle of the night. Hammond and me, we was talkin' for a solid hour, and not another soul knew he was near the F L Bar. That's why I'm positive, Mary Lou—from the words Black Jack Hammond spoke to me outa his own mouth. He had enough on Chester to hang him higher'n a kite and the skunk must've got wise to it some way. . . .

"Well, here we are at the hotel. You get a good night's sleep, my dear, and you'll feel fine and rested when I come for you in the mornin'."

CHAPTER XII

Voice of a Dead Man

THE ROOM seemed comfortable enough, the bed clean and inviting. But although Mary Lou was really tired out, sleep had never been farther from her eyes. Her uncle's revelation that the sheriff had paid a secret visit to the F L Bar the night before, just about midnight, and that the two had conferred together regarding the misdeeds and imminent arrest of Slim Chester, had come as the climax to the series of shocks that had disordered and disorganized her mental world.

Her mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions. She could not reason or think clearly and she did not try. She was sure of only one thing; and that one was that no matter what he was or what he had done, she would keep her promise to the man who had saved her from Dave Petrie. She would pay her debt to him in the keeping of that promise.

Restlessly, she moved about the room, waiting only so long before blowing out the lamp as she would have waited had she been preparing herself for the night. Then she quietly unlocked the door, locked it again on the outside, and, putting the key into her pocket, tiptoed along the dim corridor to a rear flight of stairs.

Half-way down the stairs, she stopped, listening. People was coming from the front of the building. She flattened herself against the wall in the darkness of the stair-well, her heart thudding at her throat. English Bill! She heard him speak to one of his companions, heard Dave Petrie grumble something, heard her uncle peremptorily order silence. If they came this way. . . .

But they didn't. They passed the foot of the stair, went into a room opening at the left, and shut the door. Mary Lou breathed again. Four of them. She hadn't seen who the fourth man was. But even in her mental turmoil, it seemed to her an odd thing that her uncle, who had ordered Dave Petrie off the F L Bar in the morning, and who knew that the scoundrel had attempted to attack her afterward at the White Water, should seemingly be on perfectly friendly terms with him now. Odd? It was more than odd! It was almost unbelievable.

But the whole thing was unbelievable: a snarled and twisted skein from which she couldn't hope to unravel the thread of truth.

She went on down the stairs, treading very softly as she passed the room on the left. Opening the outside door, she stepped into a dark, foul-smelling alley, littered with cans and piles of rubbish. She had to pick her way carefully among the accumulated trash. There was very little light; but a thread

of yellow showed through a crack in the shutter of the room her uncle and his men had just entered—and there was a broken wooden crate under the window.

Noiselessly, Mary Lou climbed up on the crate, steadied herself by grasping the window sill, and applied her eye to the crack. Frank Larson, English Bill, Dave Peterie, and the man they called Thad Crawford were grouped about a table in the middle of the room, with bottles and glasses set out before them. Petrie's head was bandaged, and he looked ugly and sullen; the others were grinning and exchanging meaningful glances as they passed the bottles and drank.

So much the girl saw before a warning creak in her improvised stepladder apprised her that it was quite likely to cave in beneath her. She lowered herself to a more secure perch, where she could not see what was going on in the room, but through the half open window, could hear something of what was being said, despite lowered tones.

Frank Larson was speaking, in his deep, resonant bass.

"Like to gummed up the whole works for us, Thad. She'd 'a' plugged Bill in a second if he'd tried to pull his gun. And, besides, we had to find out how much she knew. Whatever it was, she'd tell where it would do us the most harm. So we played foxy."

"Yeah. You would, boss. You sure pulled it off fine."

Mary Lou's heart seemed to skip a beat, stop altogether, before it went on thudding in her throat as if it would choke her. *That voice!* That voice, with a pronounced nasal twang, wholly different from the slurred softness of the Southwest speech. Where had she heard it before? It was curiously familiar.

Then memory awoke in a blinding flash—she knew now where she had heard it—coming from the living-room of the F L Bar ranch house the night before!

The night before—at a quarter past twelve o'clock! At the very time when her uncle had solemnly assured her that Sheriff Black Jack Hammond was paying a secret visit to the ranch! It was not Black Jack Hammond who had been in the living-room then, but Thad Crawford. It was Crawford's voice she had heard then, mingled with Frank Larson's, as she was hearing it now. Larson had deliberately lied to her!

"And so we hazed him into town and turned him over to Sam Newberry, like I told you, Thad. We done our duty, accordin' to law and order. And they ain't nobody can point a finger at us when that crowd downtown gets a mite more het up over Hammond bein' drygulched, and decides to save the county the expense of a trial! Sam, he'll talk big and make a play about the prisoner bein' in his charge and all that, but nobody won't get hurt except Mister Slim Chester—damn his stinkin' interference! Try to sit in my game and beat me at it, will he? Well, when that wild-eyed mob of hellions gets through with him tonight, his neck'll be some longer'n it is now!"

"Stub Dilly's bringin' Hammond's carcass in, is he, huh?"

"Sure; and he'll march it straight down the main street. Leave that to Stub; he's got my orders, and so have the other boys. Inside of two hours, Mister Slim Chester'll be doin' a air dance from a telegraph pole, and his sorrowin' friends'll be gettin' ready to attend the funeral. Oh, we ain't missed a trick, Thad, and we don't need to show in the necktie party a-tall. While it's goin' on—"

But Mary Lou Marshall waited for no more. She slipped off the top of the crate and ran like a terrified deer through the alley. Inside of two hours! Slim Chester, who hadn't shot the sheriff, was to be lynched for the crime! And it was her fault—hers. She had been so sure of herself, so sure that she was doing the right thing, the only thing, when she had insisted that he be taken to the jail. She could have saved him, there at the White Water.

Instead, she had let him go to a far less merciful death than would have been his from the threatened bullet of English Bill.

English Bill. . . . Dave Petrie. . . . Frank Larson. . . . Thad Crawford. Their faces. Their eyes. Their voices. And Slim. Slim Chester who had trusted her, who, although he must have known what his own fate would be, had thought only of her. He'd warned her. Told her he wanted her to get to Yellow Buttes alive. Told her to go away, stay away. Slim. . . . They were going to lynch him! The marshal wouldn't protect him. Slim Chester, the man she loved!

Oh, no matter about that—no matter that her head was in such a whirl that the thought of love for a man she'd known for hours only crowded into it. No matter about anything, except to get to Dan Halpern, to tell him everything, to make him help, do something, anything, to save Slim Chester. Hurry! Hurry! There wasn't a second to waste. Already, she had let precious minutes go by, while she listened underneath that window.

It was, perhaps, unfortunate that she hadn't let another minute go by and listened to the end of Frank Larson's sentence. It was, on the whole, an interesting and illuminating sentence. It had begun: "Whiles it's goin' on—" And it had continued: "There won't be a bloody soul in town near the bank, which'll give us just the chance we want to clean the damn place out; we can use the money, can't we, boys?"

CHAPTER XIII

The Cheese Box

DISHEVELED, breathless, almost exhausted, Mary Lou Marshall burst into the private office of the Top Notch Corral, where Dan Halpern, his heels cocked up on top of the ancient safe, was drowsing comfortably over his pipe.

At sight of the girl, his feet came to the floor with a crash; he was up and helping her to a chair. She had gasped out no more than half a dozen sentences of her story before he reached for the telephone and, giving the operator a number, spoke a few crisp words into the transmitter. Then:

"Easy does it, Mary Lou," he said. "Mr. Raymond'll be right over. If I was a mite younger, I'd go up town and learn Sam Newberry a thing or two myself, without waitin' to get help. As it is, we've just got to do the best we can. You set back and get your breath and don't worry. You've been a mighty brave girl. Now, go on—tell me the rest; easy does it."

Five minutes later when the banker, Theodore Raymond, arrived, the old gentleman was in possession of all the details that Mary Lou could give him; and he repeated them rapidly to the president of the bank, whose fine face grew sterner and more anxious as he listened.

"I was afraid something had gone wrong when Hammond didn't show up this afternoon," he said. "We had a long talk last night, and we agreed that he and Slim were to come to my house for a conference. Dan, there's just one thing for us to do, and that's to get Slim Chester out of that cheese box jail *pronto!*"

"Just what I was thinkin', Mr. Raymond. But how?"

"Have you got a heavy Stillson wrench around anywheres?"

"Sure. Got one with an extension handle."

"Good! Get it. You and I are going to sneak down that alley back of the jail. The cell corridor leads straight from the office, and there's a small window in the wall at the end of it." Raymond turned to the girl. "Which cell did they put Slim in, Mary Lou?"

"The last one on the right hand side, I think. I mean the one farthest from the office. All the other cells were empty."

"So much the better! The door that shuts off the cell corridor from the office is pretty thick, and it's nearly always kept closed. If it's closed tonight, maybe we can rip the bars out of that back window without Newberry hearing us; then we can tackle the bars on Slim's cell—it's right next to the window."

"But them deputies, Mr. Raymond?"

"There won't be any deputies! Newberry will get rid of everybody so there'll be no witnesses except the mob. He's all set to be 'overcome by superior numbers'—the old trick, Halpern. And he won't be expecting any attempt to rescue Slim. He knows all the S Bar C boys went back to the ranch with Tom Barrett's body. We'll work fast and we won't make much noise. If Newberry does hear us and comes into the corridor to investigate, I'll stick a gun under his nose and make him behave."

"I'll tell you what!" Mary Lou cried suddenly. "I'll go to the jail and talk to him—keep him away from the corridor, if I can. Don't object, Mr. Raymond, but let's get started. You and Mr. Halpern take your tools to the alley as quickly as you can and I'll go talk to the marshal!" She sprang up from her chair, darted through the doorway, and was gone.

Marshal Newberry was, as Raymond had predicted, alone in the office. A kerosene lamp was burning in a wall bracket behind his desk, and within easy reach was a rack holding a sawed-off shotgun. From a nail driven into the wall hung a big bunch of keys.

As Mary Lou stepped in from the street, she was immensely relieved to see that the door to the cell corridor was closed.

"Why, er, Miss Marshall, what brings you here?" Newberry asked in surprise. "You out all by yourself at night?"

The girl nodded. She was nervous and frightened, but she knew that it would do no harm if she showed it. Not at first.

"Y-yes, Mr. Newberry. I thought perhaps I'd find Uncle Frank with you. H-haven't you seen him this evening?"

"No, ma'am. Not since he left here with you right after dark."

"Oh, dear!" said Mary Lou, and, without waiting to be asked, sat down beside the marshal's chair at the desk, leaning her elbows on the scarred oak top. "Oh, dear, I was sure he'd be here, or that you'd know where he'd gone. I—I couldn't sleep at the hotel. It was so hot in my room and there were so many rough men at the bar, singing and shouting. I want to go home, Mr. Newberry. Couldn't you find Uncle Frank and tell him so for me, please?"

"Why, I wisht I could, Miss Mary Lou, but I can't very well leave here myself, and my deputies is all out."

"But isn't it awfully dangerous for you to stay here alone with such a desperate killer?" the girl asked, round-eyed.

"Oh, him? Huh! I could take care of half a dozen of his kind! Chester won't try none of his didoes with me on the job. Besides, he's locked up tight."

"And you're not afraid that he might get loose?" Mary Lou, pretending to be all anxious and admiring, pulled her chair closer to him and sat on the edge of it, leaning forward.

"Not much, I ain't! But even if he did,"—importantly, Newberry tapped the forty-five at his hip—"I'd cut him down to his natural size in a hurry."

"Yes, I suppose you could. But what if his friends—he must have some friends, hasn't he?—walked in that front door?"

There was a flicker in the marshal's faded blue eyes, a frown on his forehead. Then his face cleared. "His friends? Well, if any of 'em comes a-bustin' through that front door, I'll take care of them, easy!" His manner was intended to be magnificently casual. "See that there?" With a dramatic gesture, he indicated the sawed-off shotgun. "She's loaded with buckshot; both barrels. Lookin' into the

business end would make any bunch of trouble-makers back up, no matter how many of 'em there was! That is, of course, if there's a real man behind it."

"And they'd never doubt that, if it was in your hands!" the girl exclaimed admiringly. "I don't suppose you were ever really frightened in your life, were you?"

She had immediately and correctly decided that subtlety would be quite lost on Mr. Newberry. There was more flattery in her voice and glance than in her actual words, and the marshal positively purred under it. It was a long time since he had received such welcome attention from a young and pretty girl.

"I suppose, in the course of your duties as a peace officer, you've had a lot of experience in dealing with criminals and bad men generally, haven't you?" she suggested.

"Why, yes, I reckon I have. I've been in some mighty tough spots in my day, but I always managed to come out on top of the heap, one way or another. It's almost wonderful what a lone man can do if he has plenty of nerve and don't lose it in a jam."

Visibly, he was expanding, preening himself. He cut a ludicrous figure; but Mary Lou had no temptation to smile. Her one thought was to keep his attention so concentrated on herself that nothing else would distract it.

"To have plenty of nerve and not to loose it in a jam," she murmured. "That's a rare thing, Mr. Newberry. To be as steady as a rock, when there's excitement all about; to keep one's head when all the rest are losing theirs."

"Sho, now, Mary Lou, it ain't no credit to me," grinned the gratified and deluded man. "I just happened to be born that way. It's my nature to keep calm and collected—never get upset when I'm playin' agin heavy odds. Why, I remember the time—I wasn't more'n knee high to a pack-rat when—But you wouldn't be interested in hearin' about that, I reckon."

"Oh, indeed, I should!" She tugged her chair closer to the desk. "I love stories about bravery and daring. Maybe it's because I'm so timid myself that I'm fascinated by people who aren't. Do tell me!"

"Well, if you're sure you want me to. But I ain't one to brag or toot my own horn—"

"Of course, you're not. You're much too modest, Mr. Newberry. Please tell me the story you started. I know it must be awfully thrilling!"

The marshal required no further urging. It was a new and absorbing occupation, this talking about himself to a charming girl whose interest was rapturous. He enlarged on the theme of his own courage and skill, touched it up, embroidered it, until he had painted a picture of daring intrepidity that Wild Bill Hickok himself might well have envied. The girl encouraged him with smiles and gestures, and little squeals of amazement and delight. These last, apparently so spontaneous, were uttered whenever her straining ears caught a faint sound from behind the closed corridor door. Metal on metal; a muted clang. . . . If only she could keep him talking!

"And then there was that there business down to Sago. The sheriff was plumb up against it. He says to me, he says, 'Sam, I reckon you're the only feller in these parts has got the guts to—' Hello! What's that?" Newberry sat forward in his chair, listening.

For a moment, there was absolute silence, although it seemed to the girl that she could still hear that louder metallic clang echoing through the office. The marshal pushed back his chair and got to his feet, frowning, looking toward the closed corridor door.

"Certainly was somethin'. I'd better have a look."

"I heard it too, Mr. Newberry—outside. Listen! There's something strange going on. Down the street

there. Can you see anything?" She clutched his sleeve, drew him toward the front door. "Oh, there is something, Mr. Newberry! What is it? What does it mean?"

There was no one in sight in the gloomy street outside the jail. But from farther downtown, where a luminous glow marked the reflection from the lights of the main business section, there came a confused medley of sound. Blurred it was and indistinct, but pierced through with shouts and hoarse yells, heavy with the thud of hoofs, the trampling of many hurrying feet. Through the hot stillness of the windless night, it rose and fell and rose again, swelling nearer and nearer, ominous, menacing, terrible.

"Oh, what is it?" Mary Lou cried again. "What is it?"

The marshal seemed to have shrunk in size. He swallowed hard. "Why—why, I reckon the word's got out about Chester killin' the sheriff." he said. "I was afraid of it. You'd best run along back to the hotel quick, before that crowd comin' gets up here."

"Crowd coming here? But what for? What do they want?"

"The feller that drygulched Hammond. You hurry, now!"

"Oh, no, no! I couldn't! I'd die of fright! I'll stay here with you, Mr. Newberry, where I'll be safe. I couldn't go outside!"

"But you'll have to! You git along back to the hotel quick's you can. This jail ain't no safe place for you, not with that mob."

"But they can't get in! You won't let them in!"

"And how am I goin' to stop 'em? A hundred to one agin me! And this here buildin' ain't no fort. They'll take it apart!"

"But what *are* you going to do?" Mary Lou cried. "You can't let them take your prisoner, he's in your charge. Why, you were just telling me about the time when you stood off two hundred—"

"Sure, oh, sure," interrupted the marshal hurriedly. "But this is different. He was a innocent man. Chester's a crook and a murderer; he'll swing, no matter what. And look there! they's about a million of 'em comin'! They'll take this place apart, and me with it, if I try to stand in their way. Listen to 'em!"

The noise outside had risen to a great booming roar. Shouting men were running toward the jail, torches in their hands. A single rider, well in advance of the main body of the mob, was waving his quirt above his head and yelling at the top of his lungs.

"But you've got to do something!"

"Oh, I'll talk to 'em. But they won't listen. They know what they want and they're out to get it." Nevertheless, Newberry did lock the street door and closed the heavy shutters that protected the front windows. "Far as you're concerned, you'd ought to have gone to the hotel first off. Now, here! You run in back—in the corridor where the cells is. Then if there's any loose lead flyin', you won't be in no danger of gettin' hit."

Before the girl could object or prevent him, the marshal had pulled open the door leading to the cell block. There was no lamp in the passageway, but a candle, burning in Slim Chester's cell, showed two men with bandannas masking their faces, working feverishly at the bars on the cell door.

Newberry ripped out an oath, jerked his gun from its holster.

"Put 'em up, you!" he bawled. "Either of you makes a move I'll send you both to hell a-r'arin'!"

CHAPTER XIV

"Light That Fuse!"

FOR A moment Mary Lou stood as if turned to stone, staring bleakly at the scene which spelled the ruin of all her hopes and prayers: Dan Halpern and Theodore Raymond, their hands raised; Slim still a prisoner behind the bars, that, half

pried from their sockets, needed only an additional twist or two with the big Stillson to give him his freedom. But only for a moment.

Then, with a light, noiseless spring, she was at the rack where hung the saw-off shotgun. Snatching it down, she jammed the muzzle in the small of Sam Newberry's back.

"Drop that gun, Newberry!" she commanded sharply. "Drop it or I'll blow you to pieces." Her young voice was high and excited; but there was a quality in it that even Newberry recognized. And, as in a panic, he let his weapon fall clattering to the floor: "Cover him, one of you—back him into a cell and shut him up! I'll get the keys!"

Darting back into the office, she flipped them from the nail, aware as she did so of a violent hammering at the street door, which was shaking and straining on its hinges before the onslaught of the mob. But the corridor door would hold them back for a little while. She slammed it shut behind her, turned the key in the lock.

"You get into that cell, damn you!" Theodore Raymond was ordering the marshal in a disguised voice. "Make it snappy, too!"

"Oh, all right, all right," mumbled Newberry. "But a hell of a lot o' good this is a-goin' to do you. You won't none of you live even to answer to the law for these here doin's. That crowd outside'll polish you off and I won't lift a finger to stop 'em. I'll tell 'em which way you went."

Ignoring his impotent threats, they locked him in one of the cells and sped to Slim's cell, swinging the barred door open just as a loud splintering crash and a chorus of savage shouts told them that the mob was pouring from the street in the outer office.

"Rattle your spurs, Slim!" Dan Halpern called urgently.

"Rattle your own!" Slim retorted, whirling the old gentleman about and propelling him toward the narrow window from which they had been prying the bars. "Through with you! You now, Mary Lou." He picked up the girl bodily and swung her over the sill, from which she slid easily to the ground. Theodore Raymond came next, with Slim a close follower. Behind them they could hear the marshal bellowing encouragement and pleas for haste to the mob battering at the iron-sheated corridor door.

"This way, everybody!" ordered the banker. "Quick, now. They'll be after us in no time. Let me give you a hand, Dan." He caught Halpern's arm and hurried him up the alley, the girl and Slim running at their heels.

"By Godfrey damn, I'll say we better move!" Halpern ejaculated. "There goes that other door. Watch out for fireworks now!"

From the window of the jail, less than twenty yards away from them, a streak of flame cut through the gloom. A bullet whizzed past, dangerously close, followed by a scattering volley of shots.

Theodore Raymond came to a sudden halt at a high board fence.

"Over this, quick, Dan!" he rapped. "We've got to get out of range." Stooping, he made a stirrup of his cupped hands and heaved the old gentleman up. Make for that gate!"

With a nimbleness that took no account of his years, Halpern scrambled over; but his rheumatic leg twisted under him as he landed, and he had to roll out of the way of Mary Lou who, agile as a squirrel, had jumped for the top rail, flung one leg across it, and sprung to the ground before either the banker or Slim had left the alley.

The four of them raced across a yard, through a gateway, and across the street into another yard. Over another fence, past a row of shacks, and over still another fence. Down a deserted street, into an alley—out again; doubling, twisting, turning, on and on, without a pause for breath: A company of speeding shadows spurred by the menace of death that had been so close at their heels.

The yells and shots had grown fainter behind them; they seemed to have shaken off their pursuers, but Raymond pressed on.

"Where are we bound for, Slim?" Mary Lou gasped. Twice, she had tripped and would have fallen but for the support of his arm. Dan Halpern had been down three times. Rugged and hardy as he was, the pace was telling on him; he kept going by sheer force of will. It was Theodore Raymond who answered the girl's question, his face a blur in the darkness as he turned it over his shoulder.

"For the bank, of course! It's right down at the end of this street. The side door. I've got the key. Only a minute now. It's the last place where anybody will dream of looking for Slim Chester tonight. Here we are; around this corner. Newberry didn't recognize us with those masks on. He couldn't tell 'em a thing except that Slim was out. And in the morning, we'll have the county authorities here. I'll telephone Hammond's deputy. He and a posse will make short work of the whole crooked gang!"

While speaking, Raymond had unlocked the side door of the bank building and was holding it open for the others to pass inside. The darkness was absolute. They couldn't see an inch in front of their noses as they filed quickly in.

"Pretty smart idea of Mr. Raymond's, this hidin' you in the bank, huh, Slim?" chuckled Halpern. "You know him and Hammond had a pow-wow about Larson last night? Well, with what he knows about the skunk and what Mary Lou can swear to—'twas her found out they was fixin' to fit you to a rope necktie this evenin'—we'll have the whole bunch nailed. Whew! I'm goin' to be glad to set quiet a spell. By Godfrey damn, that was a close call, huh? O.K., Mr. Raymond?"

"O.K., Dan," the banker responded cheerfully. "Thank God we're all here and all safe." He shut and fastened the door, putting the key back into his pocket. "And in the only place we would be safe. If Larson's gang suspected that Mary Lou and I know about them, or that Slim is with us. . . . Better not strike a match yet, Slim. Go straight ahead until you come to the first door on the left; that's my private office. The vault is on the right. We'll be—"

A sudden swift shaft of light blazed at them out of the warm, pitchy darkness ahead, its brightness dazzling their eyes.

"Yeah; thank Gawd you're all here and all safe!" a deep, familiar voice jeered at them. "Put them flippers up and keep 'em up. Way up! Dave, you and Thad lift their smoke-irons while me and Bill keep 'em covered. Watch out, in case we have to unravel some lead."

Outside of the bright circle of light cast by the lantern, a ring of lowering, evil faces: Frank Larson's, English Bill's, Dave Petrie's, Thad Crawford's. Four leveled forty-fives. On the floor, a litter of tools—drills; an empty bottle. A shiny black cord dangling down the front of the big steel vault, its upper end hidden in a hole drilled in the solid metal. So much Slim saw in his first glance, as the taunting voice of Larson went on:

"I call it mighty neighborly of you to drop by and tell us you seen Hammond last night, Raymond; mighty neighborly. We wouldn't 've knowed it else, and we might've been a mite inconvenienced. But it's workin' out fine now. We wasn't just expectin' visitors—you can judge that for yourself!—but I'm right glad to welcome you, the way things has turned out. Thanks for fetchin' my niece along with you, though I can't say as I approve of her sashayin' 'round in the middle of the night when she'd ought to be abed. And Mister Chester! We sure wasn't lookin' to see him here!"

"Will it be any use, Larson, for me to—" Raymond began.

"Not a mite, Mr. Raymond, not a

mite! You can call it a day. You done your job; now you can set and watch us finish ours. Ever see how the door of a bank vault can be blasted clean off its hinges with a little nitroglycerine, and likely blowed through the wall? Well, it'll be a treat for all of you! Thad! Dave! Fetch some chairs. Didn't you hear Mr. Halpern say he'd like to set a while? Mister Chester can get a better view standin' up, I wouldn't wonder." Larson's laugh was a harsh, mirthless cackle. "Now, tie 'em, and shove 'em up against the door of the safe—so. And you needn't be too particular with them knots; they ain't goin' to have much time to work on 'em."

"Damn your black soul, Larson!" Slim Chester's voice was low and taut. "You don't dare to do this. The world won't be big enough to hold you if you—"

Frank Larson laughed again, his eyes sparkling with cruel triumph as the banker, Halpern, and the girl, tied to the chairs, were shoved close against the door of the safe. All who knew Frank Larson for what he was would be blown into silence forever.

"And why won't I dare, huh? Account of that girl? Well, who's goin' to know which is her and which is somebody else after that blast lets loose? Who's goin' to know anything? Tell anything? What she gets, she's brought on herself; she'll take her medicine with the rest of you. A two-bit rancher and a hick sheriff thinkin' they could outsmart Frank Larson and his boys that's been cleanin' out any bank they wanted to for the past coupla years!"

He bared his teeth in a vicious sneer.

"You're gettin' yours, Slim through the guts—as a special souvenir from me, personal. Same as I give it to Hammond from the rim-rock this mornin', only you'll cash in quicker'n he did. Stand still and take a last look on your dear friends by that safe door, and say your prayers! Everything clear for us to duck out when she blows, Petrie? . . . Fine! Go ahead, then. Light that fuse! And then let 'er rip!"

CHAPTER XV

An End and a Beginning

MATCHES flared, a yellow cone of light reflected from the polished steel door of the vault, and Dave Petrie stooped and applied it to the dangling fuse. There was a faint hiss and sputter, and the glowing end began to creep upward toward the detonating cap.

Frank Larson stepped forward, thrusting the muzzle of his gun against Slim's ribs.

"Well, how do you like the set-up now, old-timer?" he mocked. Pretty tough, huh? Still and all, it had ought to be a lesson to you nosy——"

Except for his vehement protest when he had realized the nature of Larson's murderous scheme, Slim had said nothing, done nothing. He had stood submissively, quietly, almost like a spectator of some drama with which he had no personal concern whatever. Now, like a flash, he went into action.

With almost incredible swiftness, his left hand stabbed down and across to Larson's gun, closed over the cylinder in a vise-like grip. Simultaneously, he pivoted in a half circle to the right, so that the menacing muzzle, clamped immovable in its original position, pointed across his body, instead of directly at him. The gun roared, the powder scorching the front of his shirt, as his other hand whipped out, the stiffened thumb gouging at Larson's eye. The other three gunmen were afraid to shoot—they might kill Larson.

With a wild yell of agony, the desperado jerked his head back, involuntarily loosing his hold on his weapon. Slim wrenched it from his relaxed grasp, and brought it down on Frank's skull with terrific force, crushing in the bones as if they had been so much

tissue paper. A sidewise spring, a deft flip of the wrist, and the gun roared again. Dave Petrie, the blackened match-stick still between his fingers, toppled over backward with a bullet through his heart.

As Petrie fell, Slim flung himself to the floor, firing up through the haze of powder smoke at Thad Crawford, the bullet from whose gun whistled harmlessly over his head and shattered a glass partition in one of the offices. Crawford screamed—once; a dreadful, nerve-wracking scream, and crumpled in a heap across the body of his dead leader, Larson.

A pain that was like the slash of a white-hot knife seared Slim's left shoulder. One of English Bill's shots had ricocheted from the floor and torn its way through flesh and muscle. But before the fellow could fire again, he was struck squarely in the center of the forehead. He collapsed without uttering a sound.

Staggering to his feet, Slim dragged his shirt sleeve across his smarting eyes to clear his vision. A dull red spark glowed, moved—moved upward. A spark that hissed and sputtered toward the hole drilled in the door of the vault—and only a few inches from it. Slim's body hurtled through the air. He clutched the fuse and tore it loose, trampling it under foot and extinguishing the spark when scarcely the width of his boot sole separated it from the detonating cap.

"Is—is everybody all right?" Slim's voice sounded oddly hollow in the silence that had succeeded the roaring reports of the shots. He fumbled in his pocket for his knife and stumbled toward the safe. "Mary Lou—Mr. Raymond—Dan?"

"Yes, Slim; we're all right," Raymond told him quietly. Freed of his bonds, he stood up and took the knife from Slim's hand to cut the ropes with which the girl and Halpern were bound. "You'd better go into my office and let me have a look at that arm of yours. You're losing a lot of blood. Dan, you skip in to the telephone. Call the doctor. And you might have George Cassidy come around with him, too."

"By Godfrey damn, Slim!" Dan Halpern stuttered, heaving himself up out of the chair. "I always knew you could sling a gun, but I never expected to see you do a chain' lightnin' act like that!"

"Well, after bein' kicked around all day like an old woman with no hands, 'twas about time I did something," Slim said. "I was watchin' for a chance from the minute they got the drop on us, but it looked kinda hopeless. And I still don't understand why a man with Larson's stick-up experience wouldn't know better than to push a gun right up against a fellow's ribs. He—Why, Mary Lou, darlin' you're cryin'!"

Heedless of the throbbing wound in his shoulder, he sat beside the silently weeping girl, who clung to him tightly.

"There, there, honey. This time, it really *is* all right. You mustn't cry that a-way, dear. Here, take my handkerchief. Honey, you've been awful brave. You ain't going to pieces now we've got to the end? Mary Lou, honey—" He folded her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, then passionately.

Dan Halpern, turning from the telephone, nudged the banker significantly.

"Got to the end, he says. You heard him, Mr. Raymond? Yeah, for us; the end of our worryin' about havin' the bank robbed, and who's going' to get the reward for them bandits, dead or alive. . . . The doc says he'll high-tail it right around and George Cassidy'll be here soon as he can shut his place. You goin' to call up Hammond's deputy now, Mr. Raymond? . . . Sure; the end for us, and we'll all get some sound sleep nights.

"But for them two young folks"—there was a wonderful tenderness in the old gentleman's smile as he turned from Slim and Mary Lou, who were oblivious of everything save each other—"for them two young folks, looks like it was just the beginnin'."

The trail herd boss didn't approve of a woman in the camp, particularly when she was there to point out a killer.

A Woman at the Wagon

By S. Omar Barker

THROUGH a haze of herd dust the young trail boss looked with disapproval, almost hostility, at the slight, ragged figure perched on the bony back of an old harness nag reined up beyond the cook fire.

"I tell you I'm full-handed, button. Even if I wasn't, I got no use for a raw granger's young 'un with a trail herd. You're wastin' your time follerin' this outfit in hopes of a job. Light and eat a snack, then you'd better git on back to your pappy, where you belong."

Under the tattered rim of a low-drawn straw hat the granger's young 'un gulped. But there was a tone of bitter stubbornness in the boyish treble that answered Trail Boss McGuirk:

"My father's dead. They said he was a rustler, and some damn cowman shot him!"

"Tough," said Bill McGuirk shortly. "But a mighty funny reason for you to be beggin' to throw in with a bunch of damn cowmen yourself, ain't it?"

"Maybe it is, mister, and maybe it isn't. But I'm aimin' to ride with this outfit till I find out something."

"Why this outfit, button?"

"Because," said the boyish voice, "it was somebody in this outfit that done it. You goin' to take me on—or are you scared to?"

In spite of himself Bill McGuirk grinned.

"I don't know 'bout the rest of the boys," he said, "but speakin' for myself, you got me shakin' the warts off my knees already. Light and grab you some chuck, button. But look out old Doughbelly don't throw pizen in your beans! He's kinder cowish, hisself, in shape, anyhow."

"You hiring me on, then?"

"Hell, no! But—"

"I won't eat grub I haven't earned—or goin' to earn!"

"Better rattle your hocks then." spoke up a long-faced old hand called Sandy Litrell. "Any of this outfit shot your pappy, I reckon he required shootin', and you've done heard Bill say he's not hirin' you."

When the ragged button made no move to go, old Doughbelly Brown wiped his hands on his grimy flour-sack apron, filled a tin plate and waddled around the fire with it.

"This young 'un's been follerin' me all afternoon," he grunted, "and he's hongry. He ain't goin' to leave my wagon without linin' his stummick if I got to yank him off and ram it down 'im like gun-waddin'."

He reached up a blunt-fingered hand, seized the kid by a leg and dragged him off the plow horse.

"Let me alone!" the youngster whimpered, tottering for an instant on brogan shod feet, then collapsing suddenly, helplessly in a dead faint.

"Hand me a dipper of water," said Bill McGuirk. He knelt and pulled off the battered straw hat, raised the tousled yellow head to his knee. Then as the firelight flickered on the pale, tired face, Trail Boss McGuirk sucked in his breath and swore.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "This here's a girl!"

It was dark when Rachel Dyer awoke with the snug feel of a cowboy bedroll around her and the pleasant sting of hot coffee being spooned gently between her lips. She gulped it hungrily and when the unseen hand presently brought spoonfuls of warm, tasty bean soup to her lips instead of coffee she swallowed that, too, without question.

"I must have sort of fainted," she began, as the food gave her strength. "I've been ridin' since—"

"Yeah. You went out like a kicked lantern," said a man's voice, a little curtly. "Rammin' around on an empty stomach's liable to affect you thataway. Don't talk. Just eat your beans, sister!"

"But listen, mister!" She sat up suddenly. "My name's Charley Dyer, and—"

"Mine's Pocahontas," said Bill McGuirk dryly. "Shut up and eat your supper—or shall I take it away?"

"I won't shut up!" she cried vehemently. "Some of you cowmen shot my father, and I've got to—"

"You got to eat and sleep right now." He spoke quietly, but the girl could sense a carefully restrained anger behind his words. "We'll be movin' out early and this wagon ain't no ambulance. You got to be fit to ride, come sunup!"

Fit to ride away, the young trail boss meant, not with his herd. After breakfast, with the gray of dawn twilight giving way to the rising sun and the last guard easing the herd quietly from the bed-ground to graze slowly northward, McGuirk threw in his empty tin plate and heel-squatted beside a wagon wheel to roll a smoke and issue powders.

"I've done saddled your dobbin, Miss," he said. "I calculate it's about fourteen, fifteen miles southeast to the nearest granger dugouts—on Washout Creek. Quick as you finish breakfast, Sandy'll side you over there. They'll take you in, I reckon."

The girl looked up from her plate,

a look of mixed pleading and defiance in her gray-blue eyes.

"I won't go," she began in a low voice. "Not until—"

"I expect you will," McGuirk broke in dryly. "I'm sorry 'bout the trouble you're in, Miss, but we've got a trail herd on our hands, and no time for monkey business."

"Looking for the man who shot my father isn't exactly monkey business!" Rachel Dyer said hotly. "If he's in this outfit, I aim to—"

"If you've got reason to think he is," McGuirk broke in again, not unkindly, "you best report it to the Rangers. Our track'll be plenty plain to follow." He paused a moment, then got up, went over and laid a hand gently on the girl's slender shoulder. "Vengeance ain't no job for a woman, ma'am. You better be climbin' on your horse. Sandy's waitin'."

With a little cry of helpless anger, the girl reached up and struck his hand from her shoulder. Without another word she went to her waiting horse, pushed aside Sandy's offer of help, and climbed to the battered hull of a saddle.

Grumbling at this uncowboyish chore assigned to him, old Sandy stepped across his bronc. The girl looked back once as they rode away, and Bill McGuirk saw tears on her cheeks. Outwardly he gave no sign of the strange, hollow feeling it bestirred somewhere in his innards as he flicked away his smoke and turned to his trail hands. There were six of them here, counting the coosie. Nine in all, counting old Sandy and the two out with the herd.

"Wait a minute, boys," said the trail boss, and now his tone was hard and not a little grim. "I'll have no unneedful killin' by ary man in my trail crew, and if there's one among you knows anything about this shootin' of old man Dyer, now's the time to speak up!"

"Lemme see," said a short-shanked, long-waisted waddy with a pair of round, bulgy eyes set wide in an almost egg-shaped face. "Wasn't it old man Dyer's place where you picked up our two fat three-year-olds out of a hideaway corral, boss? You an' Lefty?"

"That's right," offered Lefty Prout. "Back on the Salado. Plain case of thievery."

"Lemme see," Bug-Eye broke in thoughtfully, "seems like I heard Lefty say you warned the old coot you'd give him his needin's if you found him takin' Five R beef agin, eh, boss? Now I wonder who could of killed him?"

"'Twarn't me, anyways, nor old One-Arm," broke in Windy Miller garrulously. "Not with all the herd dust we got in our eyes, bringin' up the drag all the way from the Concho—too damn blind to shoot an elephant, weren't we, One-Arm? Not if he was settin' on our laps."

"Never mind it, Windy," Bill McGuirk said dryly. He strode over and stopped a few feet in front of Bug-Eye Shafter. "You accusin' me of this killin', Bug-Eye?"

In his tone was point-blank challenge, quiet, but plain, and hearing it, the rest of the hands stood quickly away from them. Bug-Eye met the trail boss' stare insolently.

"Who, me?" he inquired. "Hell, I ain't crusadin' for no little rat of a nester's daughter! I'm hired to shove cattle!"

Bill McGuirk's dark face flushed. The hand that had swung free, ready for his gun, suddenly fisted and struck Bug-Eye Shafter in the face. Shafter stepped back, wiping a trickle of blood from under his nose. The forced grin on his face was not a pretty one.

"Kinder forgettin' somethin', ain't you, boss?" he said, his voice flat, but his lips curled in a snarl. "Maybe you don't recollect we all signed articles for this drive, promisin' the Old Man not to do no fightin' till after the steers is delivered? When I make a promise, I keep it. So now I'm makin' you one:

"You're the boss on this drive, and I'm goin' to take what ever you hand out—till we git to Abilene. Then I'm goin' to pay you off, McGuirk, with lead in the guts!"

For a moment Bill McGuirk stood silent. Yesterday he had been a trail boss, respected, obeyed, the cowman general of a small but hardy, smooth-running little army. Now because of a girl, a nester's daughter at that, he stood before his men angry and ashamed, the first to break that pact of peace the Old Man had laid upon them; that code of the trail by which the first duty of hand and boss alike is to the herd; by which men who hated each other's guts would often ride week upon week side by side, their personal differences forgotten for the time in their common duty of trailing cattle.

It was typical of Bill McGuirk, after the first flash of temper, that he spoke out frankly.

"Bug-Eye's right, boys," he said, turning to his horse. "It's me that slipped my crupper. It won't happen again. From now on we're shovin' cattle. This nester killin' and all connected with it is dropped, right here. The herd's movin' out, boys. Let's go!"

BILL McGUIRK was wrong, however. The matter was not dropped. For when Sandy Litrell returned to the herd that afternoon, Rachel Dyer was still with him.

"Nowheres to leave her," he reported briefly. "Nary a granger left on the Washout. Dugouts all caved in and smolderin'. Run out by the cowmen, prob'ly that XL outfit, like they ort to be. So I brung her on back."

The girl was silent now, the pretty oval of her face drawn and tired, a whipped look in her eyes. Bill McGuirk looked at her without speaking.

"I'll go on back where I come from," she said.

McGuirk turned to old Sandy.

"Take her to the wagon," he ordered briefly.

There was nothing else to do. You couldn't leave a human being alone here in this wilderness, to starve like a lost puppy.

Back where he was riding swing Windy Miller grinned and began to sing twangily:

"Heifer in the herd, but the drive can't stop,
Heifer in the herd and hell's a-gonna pop!"

Across the herd Bug-Eye Shafter laughed. There was too much dust for Windy to see the gleam in his eyes as they looked after old Sandy and the girl, heading out for the wagon.

Bill McGuirk's cowboys rode in from the bed ground to the wagon that evening in uneasy silence. Women were all right, in their place. But the trail was a man's world, sweaty, whiskery, profane. A woman at the wagon was not only a novelty, it was, as old Sandy Litrell put it "plumb agin nature." That this one was young and pretty, now that she stood, scrubbed and clean, ready to help old Doughbelly ladle out their supper, didn't help any.

Cowboy enmity for nesters or grangers whose claims were already beginning to gouge deep into the cattle range was deep-rooted and this girl with the yellow hair and troubled gray-blue eyes was a daughter of the breed. Nor could they forget what motive had brought her to them in the first place. It would be a good long hundred miles to the first settlement where they could leave her, at the Crossing.

Even Windy Miller got his "eatin' tools" that evening in uncomfortable silence. But once they were eating, Rachel Dyer stood, a lone little straight-backed figure against the late sunlight streaming through the stout wheel spokes of the wagon and began to speak in a low, earnest voice.

"I—I know how you hate me, all of you, me and my kind. And God knows I've got reason to hate every man that's a cowboy. But I don't aim to make this outfit nor anybody in it any trouble—except one. And until I find out which one it is, I'm goin' to take orders and work and earn my keep, the same as a man. I know I'm not welcome here but—"

"That's right," broke in Doughbelly Brown dryly. "Speakin' for myself as cook, you ain't. But you're here, and as long as you keep your spoon outa the lick can between meals, we're goin' to git along." His gray-bushed eyes looked around the circle of cowboys challengingly, but nobody spoke.

Presently Bug-Eye Shafter came around and squatted on his heels beside the girl.

"My name's Shafter, Miss Dyer. I've got a depitty sheriff's commission in my bed-roll, and I've done right well as a stock detective off and on. You need any help along them lines, you jest call on me, any time."

"Sure," offered old Sandy Litrell dourly, "Bug-Eye'll tell you the how-come and wherefores of everything, ma'am, includin' who kilt Cock Robin, why did the speckled hen cross the road and which way's up. Only thing he don't know is which end of his tongue wags the loosest!"

"For instance," Shafter went on, ignoring the interruption and speaking loud enough to make sure that Bill McGuirk, over across the fire could hear him. "For instance, you got any clues what sort of a lookin' hombre it was cracked down on your pappy? For instance, did he leave tracks showin' him to be tall and long-legged, with maybe a right dainty foot"—he looked across at Bill McGuirk—"with extry high heels to his boots?"

"That'll be all out of you, Shafter!" Bill McGuirk's dry, quiet voice cut in sharply from over across the fire.

"Why, sure, boss!" Bug-Eye Shafter shrugged. "Certainly—if you're touchy about the subject! Come on, Spike, it's our guard, ain't it?"

For minutes after he was gone Rachel Dyer stood staring across the fire at Bill McGuirk's small, high-heeled boots, and something of the bitterness that had been in her face when she first rode up to this Five R wagon returned to it. When her gaze moved up to his lean, sober face the dark eyes that met hers were steady, inscrutable, seemingly wholly impersonal.

"Any of you boys want to spare a soogan to go with mine," he said calmly. "I'll make Miss Dyer up a bed-roll. The coosie'll wrastle room for you to sleep in the wagon, ma'am."

It gave Rachel Dyer a queer, guilty feeling when she saw that there were enough soogans and blankets offered to make three times as big a bed as old Doughbelly could make room for in the wagon. And these, she reflected, were the breed of men she had been taught to hate.

LIKE SOME mighty, mythical snake the Five R herd crawled northward up the trail; and with it went Rachel, the nester's daughter, riding with the wagon despite old Doughbelly's half-hearted protest, helping the grumbling coosie when she could, watching with fascination the smooth, clock-like functioning of a trail outfit under the command of a top trail boss. Never had she seen so much accomplished with so little talk. Bill McGuirk never discussed with his men what they should do nor how they should do it. The few orders he gave were given briefly and quietly—and promptly obeyed, even by Bug-Eye Shafter. All this was as it should be.

But in the quietness of these men about the evening campfire, Rachel sensed a grudging restraint, an uneasy silence in her presence. Windy Miller would start a story, look at her and shut up. Lefty Prout's guitar lay in the wagon, untouched. "They hate me," she thought, "because I'm a nester's daughter. Well, let them hate. *One* of them killed my father."

But which one?

If she had known cowboys she would have realized that it was not mere dislike of her that harnessed Windy Miller's tongue and kept Lefty's guitar silent in the wagon. Not hate, but

shyness. The aloof, almost unfriendly politeness with which they spoke to her, if they spoke at all, had little or nothing to do with her being a nester's daughter. She was a woman at the wagon—where no woman belonged, that was all.

Only Bug-Eye Shafter went out of his way to be friendly. Sometimes when Bill McGuirk had ridden on ahead to scout the trail for good bedgrounds and water, Shafter would leave the herd to come and ride with her a while behind the wagon.

"You need a friend, girlie," he would say. "A man to kinder look after you—and I'm him."

Once he rode close, reached across and put his arm around her. When she pulled away there was a look on his face that frightened her.

"You better be nice to me, sweetheart," he told her with a look that was half grin and half leer. "I've got information that I expect you'd give a heap to find out."

Rachel Dyer paled. "You mean—"

"Nothin' else but," said Bug-Eye. "I know who gunned old man Dyer! So long, sweetheart. I'll be seein' you!"

Rachel stared after him as he whirled his horse and spurred away in a fog of dust.

The next time he came to the wagon during the day, the girl ignored old Doughbelly's advice to climb up on the seat with him, "where Bug-Eye kin make love to both of us at once," and let her horse lag back well out of earshot.

"Hot, ain't it, sweetheart?" Shafter greeted her boldly. "Let's you and me step off yonder in the shade of them oaks where it's cool and we can talk. You can ketch up with the wagon quick enough afterwards."

Rachel looked at him, her blue-gray eyes like smoldering smoke.

"If I do, will you tell me?"

"Sure," Bug-Eye said and led the way.

The girl was trembling as she dismounted. One of Bug-Eye's hands caught hers and pulled her to him. The back of his other hand wiped sweaty trail dust from his lips.

"No, no!" she tried to pull away from him.

"Suit yourself," said Bug-Eye, letting her go. "No kiss, no talk. Well, so long, I'll be—"

"Wait!"

Bug-Eye turned as the girl's hand touched his arm.

"If you'll tell me," she faltered. "I'll—I'll—"

"Kinder thought you'd come to it, sweetheart!"

With a rough, yanking motion he pulled her to him. The face she turned up to his was pale under its sunburn, the lips fixed in a grim, tight line.

At the quiet sound of a man's voice Bug-Eye whirled, but his left arm did not release her. A few yards away Bill McGuirk sat, stiff as a ramrod, in his saddle.

"Get back to the herd, Shafter!" The words came out clipped, quiet, for all their cold hardness.

For an instant Bug-Eye stood motionless except for the right hand that crept downward toward his gun. Then, with an insolent laugh he pulled the girl suddenly to him again, kissed her and strode to his horse. For a moment Bill McGuirk's narrowed eyes followed him, riding away toward the herd. Then he turned to the girl. She stood beside her horse, twisting her hands together till the knuckles showed white.

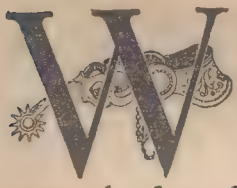
"Oh," she burst out, "please don't think I—"

"Never mind what I think," Bill McGuirk's quiet voice broke in. "Hereafter you stay with the wagon."

As she got on her horse Bill McGuirk started to ride away, then seemed to change his mind, for he came and loped beside her to overtake the wagon. But he kept his eyes straight ahead and said nothing. When they overtook the wagon, careening over a stretch of rough going, he spurred up alongside the driver's seat.

"Bear west when you hit the dry wash, Doughbelly," he called out. "I'll signal you when I find water. Whyn't you tell me Shafter's been ridin' the tail-board?"

"Ugh!" grunted Doughbelly without turning his head; meaning he was a man who minded his own business. But he grinned broadly at the young trail boss's long back as he loped on ahead. "Honey draws the bees," he grunted over the reins to his mules. "Yee-up!"



HEN BUG-EYE SHAFTER returned to his place at the swing, Windy Miller's voice sang out raucously to him across the dusty backs of the herd:

"Went to the wagon to git him a smack,
But the boss come along and run him back!
Coma-ti-ti-youpy-youpy-yip-youpy-yay,
Coma—"

"Shut your damn mouth over there!"

At the anger in Shafter's voice Windy Miller's song broke off abruptly. He spurred suddenly closer to the cattle.

"Whose mouth you say?" he shouted across their backs, and there was no good-humored rawhiding in his tone.

"You heard me!" Bug-Eye reined up. "And what about it?"

"Ain't no scrub damnin' me to shut up!" Windy clipped out. "Start lookin' for your hawg-leg, Shafter, fer I'm comin' over there!"

Instantly both men spurred their horses, forcing them to cut into the broad band of moving cattle. From up ahead old Sandy Litrell saw the herd breaking, quit his place and came at a lope. From nearer by Lefty Prout and Tom Luling saw the trouble making and spurred in to stop it. The herd here was some sixty or seventy feet wide and men in the temper of these two generally choose to settle their differences closer up, face to face. Yet at first it was hard to put a horse straight into that surge of moving cattle, and the two cowboys made slow headway.

Then Bug-Eye lashed a big old mosshorn across the face with a rope end to force him out of the way, the rope knot struck the steer's eye, blinded him. With a wild bellow of pain and fear he whirled to run, and suddenly the slow-moving band of longhorns broke, horns clacking against horns as they ran.

It was the swinging slash of Lefty Prout's rawhide rope that struck the gun from Shafter's hand as the two men came now face to face in the moiling herd dust, and in another instant old Sandy Litrell spurred between them.

"Stop it, boys! Stop it!" he said, and in his voice was much the same quiet tone of authority with which Bill McGuirk was wont to get instant obedience.

Windy Miller's gun had never left its holster. "Can't no man go damnin' me around!" he said. "I'll—"

"Hell, cain't you take a joke?" Bug-Eye shrugged, licking at his lips nervously. "I jes—"

"Ride, boys!" old Sandy broke in. "This here ruckus is over and done with and the cattle's runnin'!"

It was not, in broad daylight, a disastrous stampede, but it was a near thing to it. When Bill McGuirk returned to point the herd to the spot he had picked for bed-ground he found it a milling tangled mess of nervous, spooky longhorns. Not till he had helped the hands string them out again did he ask any questions. Then he rode up alongside old Sandy Litrell.

"How come this, Sandy?"

"It come of carryin' a woman at the wagon, if you want to know," growled the grizzled puncher, and told him what had happened.

It was dark by the time the herd was bedded. The crew ate supper in silence. Finally old Sandy cleared his throat.

"The boys would like to speak to

you private, Bill." He looked meaningly at Rachel Dyer.

"Yeah," said Tom Luling, a little sarcastically, "maybe the lady'll jest step in the other room."

Rachel looked at Bill McGuirk, something like fright in her eyes.

"Maybe you better turn in, Miss Rachel," he said, his voice strangely gentle. "I reckon we can trust you not to listen."

The girl nodded. It was the first time Bill McGuirk had deigned to call her by name, and he was going to trust her, quite simply, not to listen to what she was not supposed to hear. Something like a lump seemed to tighten her throat. Then she stood, stiff and straight before them.

"I—I— Will somebody lend me a pocket-knife," she faltered. "I— One of my shoe laces— I've got to cut it."

Half a dozen hands delved into pockets, but she could not help noticing that neither old Sandy nor Windy Miller nor Bill McGuirk made such a move. She reached out to accept the first knife offered. It was Bug-Eye Shafter's. But Bill McGuirk stepped suddenly between them, dropped to his knee.

"I reckon I can unknot it for you," he said. "No need cuttin' it."

To his surprise both laces were neatly tied with bow-slip knots that a child could undo.

When she had disappeared into the darkness of the tarp shelter Doughbelly had rigged for her in the wagon, Bill turned to his crew.

"If it's about that ruckus this afternoon, boys," he began, "there's naught to be said. Windy, I could fire you and Bug-Eye, but I don't aim to. Hereafter jest keep your pants on!"

Old Sandy cleared his throat again.

"It's about the lassie, Bill," he said. "You better let me take her on ahead to the Crossing. I say it'll be trouble brewin' as long as she's at the wagon. And most of the boys"—he paused to beetle his shaggy brows at Bug-Eye Shafter—"agree with me."

"Yeah," offered a youngster named Ed Pickens. "Maybe you're blood runs ice, Bill, but ours don't."

"And this damn fool business of her waitin' around to name one of us a murderer," grunted Tom Luling. "I don't like it."

For a moment Bill McGuirk squatted by the fire, lighting his pipe with a live coal, gravely silent. Then he stood up.

"Like it or not, boys," he said, "I reckon we'll weather it. Our wagon'll be this pore kid's home till we hit a safe place to leave her. Better roll in boys, the night's short."

An hour after he was in his bed-roll Bill McGuirk lay awake, looking at the stars, listening to the soft sounds of the night hawks circling the bedded herd. Then he heard something else. It was a woman's stifled sobbing. After a while he slipped on his slicker and went over to the wagon.

"Cryin' won't help none, little girl," he chided gently. "Jest four more days and we'll be at the Crossing.

Inside the wagon the sobbing stopped.

"Th-thank you," came Rachel Dyer's muffled voice. "I didn't aim to be such a baby, B-Bill."

When he returned to his bed-roll Bill McGuirk lay awake a long time, looking up at the stars.

THROUGH the crispness of early morning, on through the sun-whipped heat of mid-day the herd rolled northward again, as if nothing had happened. But on the second day, when the trail boss once more rode ahead to scout the trail, Bug-Eye Shafter quit the herd and came again to the wagon. He approached Rachel.

"I could kill a man for a gal like you, sweetheart," he said, meaningly, "if you'd use the right way of persuadin' me. What about it?"

Rachel dropped back with him, well behind the wagon.

She said in a low tone, "I don't want anybody to kill anybody for me, Mr. Shafter. All I want is—"

"To know who downed your dad. Well, jest ride over into yonder draw with me, where nobody won't hear it, sweetheart, and I'll tell you! McGuirk won't be poppin' up to stop us today. He's done rode—"

"Oh, I can't go with you!" the girl cried out. "I can't! I promised Bill I'd stay with the wagon, and—"

"So it's Mister Shafter to me, but Bill for McGuirk, eh?" Bug-Eye spoke harshly now. He rode close and seized the girl roughly by the wrist. "You're a damn little fool," he almost snarled. "McGuirk's the man you're lookin' for!"

"You mean—"

"Jest what I said. McGuirk hates grangers, and he shot your pappy down like a dog. He don't know it, but I saw him do it. Listen to me, sweetheart," his voice lowered and became urgent, "it's broken country up ahead, and he's ridin' it alone. You and me can foller him."

Suddenly the girl's hand jerked free and struck him across the mouth. Then she seemed to wilt in the saddle.

"I don't believe it," she said dully. Then she dug her heels hard against her horse's ribs and fled to overtake the wagon.

Red-faced, cursing audibly to himself, Bug-Eye Shafter rode back to the herd.

When Bill McGuirk came into supper that evening after helping squeeze down the herd for that night's bedground, Rachel Dyer stood alone, a small, forlorn looking figure backed up against the wagon wheel, her face pale, her lips a thin, red line, her hands shoved deep in her pockets.

When he had washed, the lank trail boss filled a plate and took it to her, but she shook her head and pushed it away. Her lips opened as if she were about to speak, then closed again, tightly.

All through supper her eyes did not leave McGuirk. A strained silence, broken only by the small sounds of the men eating, hung like a pall over them all.

Warily, Bug-Eye Shafter's eyes shifted from the girl to McGuirk, from McGuirk to the girl, back and forth, back and forth. Twice he eased his gun up in its holster. If anybody noted the move they gave no sign of it.

When the trail boss had finished eating he threw in his plate and squatted beside the fire to fill his pipe. He struck it twice on his boot to knock out the dottle, sucked on it a couple of times, empty, then turned to Lefty Prout.

"Loan me your knife a minute, Lefty," he said. "This pipe bowl's kinder clogged.

"Sure," said Lefty and reached in his pocket.

Then suddenly, swiftly Rachel Dyer left the wagon wheel and stood before Bill McGuirk, looking down at him, a strange grim look in her eyes.

"Will this do, Mr. McGuirk?" Her voice had the flat sound of cold resolution. Her right hand was fisted down in a pocket. In the palm of her left lay a slender-shanked, pearl-handled pocket knife. Bill McGuirk stared at it.

"Why, where'd you get that?" he asked in frank surprise.

"Is it yours?"

"Why, sure, but I lost it a hundred miles or more back. How come you—"

"Lost it!" said the girl bitterly. "And this with it?"

She held a scrap of paper up in the firelight. There were blood stains on it, and a scrawl that read:

"This is what happens to damn nesters," and the Five R brand below it.

Bill McGuirk's face was a mask, as he read it. "That's my knife all right," he began calmly, "but—"

"I found it," Rachel Dyer broke in, bitterness tanging the flat coldness of her voice, her lips trembling, "I found it pinning this note to the hand of my murdered father. I've been waiting to

find out which one of you had *lost* a knife. So now—"

She broke off abruptly and her right hand came up out of the bulging depths of her pocket, gripping a little pistol.

"You didn't give him a chance," she said, "but I'll give you one. You've got a gun, haven't you?"

Still squatting on his boot-heels, Bill McGuirk looked at her, his eyes troubled but steady. He made no move, either to rise or reach for his gun.

"Not to draw on a woman," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

From across the fire Bug-Eye Shafter's harsh laugh broke in.

"Then maybe you'll draw it on a man!" he taunted. His hand reached back for his own.

Bill McGuirk turned deliberately toward him. "Why, yes, I might," he drawled, and the blue barrel of his .45 showed suddenly in the firelight. "I'm waitin', Shafter!"

"Shoot! Damn it, girl! Pull that damn trigger!" Bug-Eye yelled it frantically, but the gun in Rachel Dyer's hand began to tremble, then dropped suddenly from her grip.

"I—I can't! I can't do it!"

From over across the fire Bug-Eye Shafter's sixgun roared, and as he rocked back on his boot-heels, Bill McGuirk's answered it. Instantly the girl threw herself between them. With a yowl of pain, his left arm dangling, Bug-Eye Shafter started around the fire.

"No you don't!" It was old Sandy Litrell now who blocked his way, his battered old sixgun prodded deep into Shafter's belly. "Come to think of it, Shafter, I recollect hearin' Bill say he'd lost his knife a way back yonder and I recollect seein' you pick it up. Natcherly I supposed you'd give it back to him, stead of usin' it to label a murder!"

For an instant there was sudden silence, then Bill McGuirk, on his feet again, spoke in the same quiet voice with which he issued his orders.

"I'd be obliged if you'd step back, Sandy," he said. "And the rest of you. This is between me and Shafter!"

"But, Bill, he'll—" Rachel cried.

Gently he pushed the girl away from him. But over across the fire, as Sandy Litrell stepped back, Bug-Eye Shafter suddenly dropped his gun and threw his hands high over his head.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

With a gesture of contempt the trail boss holstered his gun.

"Old man Dyer told me and Lefty you'd sold him them Five R steers he had, Shafter," Bill said calmly, "but he was a granger, and you a cowhand, and I didn't believe him. So you murdered him to keep his mouth shut. I ought to kill you where you stand! But," he shrugged, looking at Shafter's hands reached high above his head, "there'll likely be a Ranger at the Crossing and Texas law ain't likely to be out of rope."

"If they are," began Windy Miller, as he yanked Shafter's hands down none too gently to lash them behind him, "I'll lend 'em mine."

Suddenly, after days of strained silence Windy was himself again, but the trail boss was not listening. He was looking down at the yellow-gold hair of a girl whose anxious fingers were working at his sleeve.

"You're hit, Bill!"

"Why, yes," said Bill McGuirk gravely, and plainly it was not the bullet scratch he was talking about, for he seemed to have no trouble reaching his arm gently about Rachel Dyer's shoulders. "Yes, I reckon I am, honey, bad hit—in the heart!"

Late into the night Bill McGuirk lay in his bed-roll and looked at the stars. Tomorrow they would reach the Crossing and then—then the rest of the trail would be strangely lonely again, for when a man is trailing cattle he can't be bothered with a woman at the wagon.

But after the steers are delivered, if there is a woman waiting, he can always come back. And she'd said she'd wait. Bill smiled happily at the stars.

Third Strike Is Out

By Herbert A. Woodbury

That roan devil Fireball put this bronc-rider into a hospital twice—and once into the arms of a very pretty cowgirl.

AFTER the red horse threw him and trampled him at Cheyenne, Jim Baxter came to the end of his career as a professional bronc-rider. He didn't realize it, at first. The day he walked out of the hospital, he stood there, tall, broad-shouldered, grinning at the doctor.

"Doc," he said, "you follow the newspapers, and you'll be readin' one of these days before the year's over that I've won myself a championship, somewhere."

Then, leaving Cheyenne, feeling like a million dollars, fully recovered physically from the injuries which had hospitalized him for four weeks, he headed for Pendleton. And when one of the easier horses there in the Pendleton string piled him after three crow hops, the first day of the show, Jim set it down, then, simply to an off day. A man couldn't always be up to scratch, like a machine. Jim didn't worry about it.

But a couple of months later, after a series of similarly unsuccessful rides on down the California leg of the bronc

circuit, Jim did begin to worry. He was getting thrown a lot, these days. And when he didn't get thrown, he was still giving only a second-rate performance. After a particularly disastrous fiasco in a place called Las Cruces, in a tiny hick rodeo where he'd failed against merely local, amateur competition, Jim took his troubles to old Bill Riordan, veteran clown and trick-rider of the circuit. And old Bill told him:

"You've lost your nerve, Jim."

Jim bristled, the hot color swimming up into his face. "You mean I'm yellow?"

Bill shook his head. "Not yellow, boy. If you was yellow, I reckon you wouldn't even be in there tryin'. But what I said goes. You've lost your nerve. You used to git up on a bronc, confident and reckless and devil-may-care. Now, you never climb onto the hurricane deck without bein'— I'm goin' to call a spade a spade. You got will-power. You got guts. But still, you never ride without bein' afraid; scared. And as long as you feel that way, you're goin' to go on losin'."

Bill was quiet a minute. "Only two solutions occurs to me," he said finally. "One's to quit exhibition ridin', and forgit you ever wanted to be a champion."

Doggedly, Jim shook his head.

"The other'd be to find out if that there red bronc that tossed you into the hospital ain't bein' exhibited somewheres along the winter circuit. If you could draw him again and ride the hide off'n him this next time, your nerve would come back to you. But it's pretty potent medicine, boy. That hoss has got one strike on you, now. If he ever gits a second—"

"He won't," Jim said with determination. "Damned if he will. . . ."

The red horse did, though. He piled Jim a second time at Tucson, the morning of Washington's birthday. Jim didn't get him in the day's regulation draw. He could have gone through the three days of the show with the odds approximately twenty to one against his drawing the red horse at all. But he wanted to prove to himself that the red bronc didn't have his number. So he arranged for a private ride, by special permission and indulgence of the officials, in the empty arena on the first morning of the show. And after that ride, Jim Baxter knew he was through as a professional bronc-peeler.

He got on the red horse, that morning, outwardly cool as a cucumber. But try as desperately as he would, he couldn't banish the inner fear and awe he had of the bronc. He knew that he was licked at the beast's first move. The animal didn't come out of the chutes as the wings were thrown open. He did what he'd done at Cheyenne; reared, tried to smash Jim back against the heavy timbering of the pen. One of the riders who'd helped Jim saddle, prodded the horse from behind with an iron pipe. The bronc didn't get away with his maneuver. But the attempt, the memory of the dreadful pain he'd suffered in the hospital at Cheyenne, took the starch out of Jim. He went out into the arena, afraid that he wasn't good enough for the treacherous red bronc. And he wasn't.

He lost a stirrup. The animal's second hop sent him sky-high. He lit flat, pancaking, the breath knocked out of him. The red devil turned on him. Over him reared a shadow. Two striking front hoofs descended. That was about all Jim remembered until he awoke in a white hospital room, the sweet, sickish scent of ether still in his nostrils.

The doc told him two months later: "You was damned lucky, partner. . . ."

Jim knew it. Sometimes, in an older rider, internal injuries didn't mend. Jim shook hands with the doctor, and walked slowly down the street to the railroad station, five dollars in his pocket. The red horse had two strikes on him, now. Jim made up his mind that he wouldn't ever give the animal a chance to get a third. He was through

as a professional bronc-rider. He was quitting while the quitting was still good.

He rode a freight that night out of Tucson. The next morning, a brakeman chased him from the train in the yards of a place called Claybank, New Mexico. Claybank looked like a nice little town; high in the piñons and cedars. Only Jim hit Claybank too late in the season to find work assisting in any of the spring round-up drives. And maybe, fresh from the hospital, pale and thin, he didn't look strong enough to any prospective employer, either. He ended up, finally, getting a job in Sid Perkin's White Front Grocery.

AUTUMN came to Claybank, that year, with long, lazy Indian summer days and cool, brisk nights and mornings. Ginny Adams drove into Claybank one September morning with Ben Rodney, whom, probably, some day, she was going to marry. Ginny was twenty now. She'd been waiting for Ben ever since she'd been seventeen. For three years, Ben had been saying:

"Wait till I save money enough."

She'd argued with Ben. "Money? You've got money enough to give up your job with Dad and rent the old Frazier place."

Only Ben had shaken his head. "I ain't goin' to commence on no shoestring and be wiped out in a couple of bad years." He was prudent, Ben; he figured everything out mathematically, and never took a chance on anything, and Ginny realized that she probably ought to be grateful to be engaged to a young man who was so sensible. Although sometimes she didn't know. There was the hardy gambling spirit of her pioneer forebears in Ginny. Sometimes, Ginny thought it would be a whole lot more exciting to fall in love with some dashing, reckless, romantic cavalier and elope to the ends of the earth with him.

Ben brought the buckboard to a halt in front of the White Front Grocery. Ben at her side, Ginny mounted the steps of the loading platform. They went in. Sid Perkin's new clerk, Jim Baxter, waited on them. Ginny's dark eyes took Sid's new clerk in from tip to toe. The man had changed a lot, lately. He'd hit town in the spring, pale and thin, a miserably pathetic, melancholy figure. But he'd changed lately. He'd put on weight, filled out. He didn't seem to fit, now, at an inside job. Ginny wondered if it were true what Ben Rodney said about him. Ben had said:

"I was talkin' to Sheriff Evans, the other day, and the sheriff tells me he's keepin' an eye on that hombre in the grocery store. Remember how pale he looked when he first hit town? As if he might of jest come out of the penitentiary? Well, is it a coincidence or ain't it, that two weeks after he hits town, these here hold-ups start?"

Ginny had sniffed. "But plenty of the hold-ups have taken place during the hours Jim Baxter's been at work."

Ben had looked at her, wise and owlish. "Shore. But accordin' to Sheriff Evans, them there two Mexicans might be holin' up the other side of the Border, and sashayin' over here for their raids only when they got the tip from somebody they have planted in the town. How'd they know, the night they held up South Brothers hardware store, for instance, that your dad had asked South Brothers to keep them cattle receipts of his in the safe till the bank opened Monday? Somebody saw your dad give Will South the money; gossiped about it in the grocery store, and that jail-bird clerk overheard the gossip. . . ."

Ginny's eyes, now, continued to take in Jim Baxter. So he was a dangerous hombre, was he? She didn't know why, but the idea didn't frighten her. Rather, it somehow intrigued her. After three years of the cautious, placid, prudent Ben's company, she wondered

what it would be like to meet somebody dangerous, thrilling.

And then, as Jim Baxter made up her order, it happened. The front door abruptly opened. And in walked two men in long yellow saddle slickers. Blue bandanna masks hid their faces. In the swarthy right hand of each man was a drawn gun. One of the pair barked, "Elevate 'em, hombres!"

Ginny shot a glance at Ben. Ben stood there, armed. Ben had boasted lately, "There's a thousand dollars' reward out for the capture of them bandits and one of these days I'm goin' to git it. You just watch." Only all Ben did now was to stare in stupid astonishment at the pair. She darted a glance at Sid's clerk. Jim Baxter was lifting his hands, too.

The bandit barked his second command. "Open up the safe, hombre. There's a couple of thousand dollars' worth of gold nuggets in there that an old prospector left with you overnight. *¿ Verdad?*"

Ginny watched Jim Baxter turn, walk down the aisle behind the counter, kneel in front of the safe. One bandit followed him. The second bandit was ordering Ben to reach behind his back, unbuckle his gun-belt, drop it. Ginny tensed. She'd know in a minute whether the clerk, Baxter, was in with the bandits or not. For there was a gun in Sid's safe. Sid had told her about it once; made her promise not to tell anyone else. Sid had said:

"And so, if any bandit ever come in and ordered me to open my safe, I'd open it for him, meek as a lamb. Only, there'd be that there gun, settin' there on the shelf, butt-end towards me. I'd grab it, and . . . ."

So Ginny waited to see whether Sid's clerk, who undoubtedly knew about the gun, snatched up the weapon, whirled on the bandit, and blasted the man into eternity.

A minute ticked past. The clerk had the safe open. He was moving back . . . the bandit was rifling the safe. And there wasn't any gun-play. A couple of more minutes ticked past, and the bandit carrying two heavy canvas sacks was marching Jim Baxter at pistol point, back up the aisle. He was rejoining his partner who'd disarmed Ben. The two of them were backing for the door. It was all over.

And then, abruptly, it wasn't all over either. For, the instant the door closed, Ginny saw Jim Baxter scoop two tin cans from the counter, and make a dash. He flung himself through the portal. Ginny saw him silhouetted, tall, broad-shouldered, blond hair gleaming in the sunlight on the loading platform as he hurled one of the cans. Lead from the sidewalk crashed instantly. A bullet smashed the door jam. Ginny didn't see any more. Ben, pale, white, trembling, had her by the hand. Ben was diving behind the shelter of the counter, dragging her after him.

Outside there was a battle in progress that the town talked of for days. Jim's first hurled can had hit the one bandit solidly in the head, dropped the man, pole-axed. The man's companion had blasted, missed. Jim had let go with the second can, caught the second bandit only a glancing blow. But the blow had interfered with the man's aim. And now with a leap, Jim closed the distance between himself and the second bandit.

Butting the man in the stomach with his lowered head, Jim knocked him down. The gun slipped from the swarthy hand, slid a couple of feet down the plank sidewalk. A pair of knees came up into Jim's midriff, catapulted him backward. The Mexican bounded to his feet, dived for his gun. Jim bowled him sidewise with his fist; they clinched, slugging. Fierce, primitive joy flowed up inside Jim. He'd realized that he was stronger than he'd been when he'd first hit Claybank, but he hadn't realized until this test how really strong he was. His antagonist was bigger than he was. Jim took one blow over the heart that nearly stunned him. But he came back lifting a hay-

maker from his boot-tops. The Mexican went down and out.

Jim stood there, blood-stained, puffing, surrounded by the crowding, pressing throng. Where the street had been deserted a moment ago, it was jammed, now. Now that he no longer needed assistance, folks had come running from all directions. Sid Perkins, his employer, who'd been at breakfast on down the street when the ruckus had started, was facing him, demanding in tones of puzzled awe:

"But what I want to know is why you waited till they went out the door and then tackled 'em with bare hands? Why didn't you grab the gun there in the safe?"

Jim didn't have the opportunity to answer. A pretty, dark-eyed, dark-haired young girl in fringed buckskin skirt and flame colored silk blouse had materialized there by him. She was the girl whom Jim had been waiting on when the hold-up had started. Her name was Ginny Adams. Jim knew, because he'd written her father's name frequently on charge slips in the grocery store. And he knew because he'd admired her for a long time. He listened now while the girl answered for him:

"I'll tell you why, Sid. He didn't reach for the gun because— Don't you see—" She was talking to Sid, only she wasn't looking at Sid. Jim felt the two soft dark eyes fixed upon himself. Ginny Adams was saying, "He didn't make a play for the gun, Sid, because he didn't want any bullets flying there with me in the store." She smiled again at Jim, her eyes all bashful friendship. "Isn't that right, Jim Baxter?"

Jim felt the hot crimson flood up into his cheeks. It was right enough. He'd marched down the aisle, there, knowing that there was a gun in Sid's safe. Only there'd been that second bandit covering the girl and her companion, and he hadn't dared risk what that second bandit's nervous trigger-finger might do with the gun pointed at the girl, if he snatched up Sid's gun and started a battle. But gosh, it embarrassed him to let on, in front of the girl and all these people, that he'd been a hero.

Hero? He felt a little twinge. He hadn't told anybody in Claybank about his past. You didn't boast, naturally, about being a washed-up bronc-rider who hadn't the nerve to go on. He wondered how much awe and worship there'd remain in those deep brown eyes, if the girl knew that he woke up nights sometimes and dreamed a nightmare about a red-devil horse that was rearing over him, striking him, pounding the life out of him.

Jim flushed. "Ma'am," he told her, "all I did was what seemed the best strategy to me. Let's let it go at that, shall we?"

That was the way he looked at it, himself. He hadn't done anything particularly wonderful. Because he hadn't been particularly afraid of the bandits.

He smiled back at the girl; she went on smiling at him. Jim and Ben Rodney, who'd come out of hiding, helped the sheriff to pack the two unconscious Mexicans off to jail. Jim went back to the grocery store; sold groceries until the middle of the afternoon. Then he looked up to see Ginny Adams in the White Front Grocery for the second time that day. Ben wasn't with her, this time. She was accompanied by her father, old Dan Adams. And it was old Dan who spoke:

"Hombre," said Dan, "understand you was lookin' for a job cow-punchin' when you first hit town, this spring. Still lookin' for one, are you?"

So Jim rode out to the Adams ranch, that afternoon.

A MONTH drifted by. Jim was equal to his job. There was a stampede at the Bar A one night. Jim was the man who, more than anybody else, saved the herd. One afternoon Jim found a steer bogged

in quicksand, and it was Jim who, without time to ride back to the ranch for help, risked his life in the treacherous gray ooze to get the animal out, single-handed. Just all in a day's work to Jim.

He saw a lot of Ginny, that month. Ginny seemed to turn up at the corrals whenever he was branding; out in the hills for a casual ride, when he was stationed with the chuck wagon. Only he understood that Ginny was engaged to Ben Rodney, so it didn't occur to him that Ginny was beginning to regard him as the dashing, reckless, romantic cavalier she'd used to dream about. Besides, why should it have occurred to him, anyway? He still had his nightmare dreams of the red horse. He didn't regard himself as dashing and reckless. He worshipped Ginny from afar, but deep in his soul he felt he wasn't man enough for her, so he never made any attempt to make good-natured, casual friendship ripen into anything else.

Then, one night, Ginny came down to the bunkhouse, about eight-thirty, all tricked out in a ruffled, flowered dress of billowy organdy. She called Jim outside, and said to him:

"Jim, how'd you like to take me in town to the dance?"

Jim blinked at her. "B-but I thought you was goin' with—"

Ginny gave her head a toss. "I was," she said. "Ben asked me, and I was going with Ben. Only Ben went in town this afternoon and he hasn't come back. Ben's stood me up, and I'm so mad that—"

Jim hesitated a minute. Ginny didn't know what he was thinking about; that he was standing there, the roof of his mouth dry, thinking: "Gosh, she's pretty. Watch your step, hombre, or you'll be in love with her. And gosh, wouldn't it be awful to fall in love with her and have to tell her you'd been a quitter." Ginny gave her head a second toss.

"Of course," she said, "if you're afraid of Ben. . . ."

Jim came to. "I ain't afraid of Ben, ma'am," he told her in all honesty. "I'm jest—" He was on the spot. He didn't know what to say. He didn't want to take her out under false pretenses. Maybe this was the moment to come clean with her. Maybe this was the time to say, "Look, Ginny, before I go takin' you any place, I want to tell you somethin' about myself." Only, somehow, he shied away from the confession. She was sweet. She was sympathetic. He guessed, if he explained it all to her, she'd understand. But that was the heck of it. He didn't want her understanding; pitying him, feeling sorry for him.

He cleared his throat. He was going to plead a previous engagement. And then abruptly, he didn't have to plead anything. For as he stood there, hoofbeats rang out in the ranchyard. A deputy from town pounded in. The man poured forth his story. The two Mexican bandits, about seven o'clock that evening, had sawed the bars in their cell, broken jail. Now, word had just been brought in by Ben Rodney that the two men were holed up in a little cabin five miles away. The sheriff had started out from town with a posse. But the sheriff wanted reenforcements in case the pair in the cabin decided to shoot it out.

Jim looked at Ginny. "That means me," he said.

And he saw the radiance that lit up Ginny's face. She nodded. "Sure, Jim, that means you, naturally." She caught his hand swiftly, impulsively. "But oh, Jim, please be careful. Don't think it's up to you to capture them single-handed. Promise me!"

Jim flung himself into the saddle. He, the deputy and a half dozen other Bar A riders were off. They joined the posse surrounding the cabin, where the two Mexicans had elected to shoot it out.

Rifle-fire came from the cabin for a long time. Then, abruptly, a white flag of truce poked itself through a smashed window. The posse held its

fire. One of the Mexicans opened the door of the cabin, came shuffling forward.

Simultaneously, there came a shot from a few feet behind Jim, and the Mexican who was marching forward, hands above his head, peacefully surrendering, dropped. Jim made a leap for the spot from which the shot had come. Brush broke ahead of him. Jim tripped, fell flat on his face. Whoever had fired the treacherous shot made good his escape.

"But I'd recognize the hombre," Jim said to the sheriff, "if I ever saw him again.

"Meanin' you saw his face?"

Jim shook his head. "All I saw was his back."

"And you claim you could recognize a man," Ben Rodney asked sneeringly, "by his back?"

Jim nodded. "Yep, if I ever seen the hombre, posed as he was out there in the clearin' between them two bushes, I think I'd recognize him again." It sounded cock-eyed, maybe, to be so sure. But Jim was sure. Some coward, some renegade there in the posse had treacherously shot down a man in the act of surrender, fled into the brush and out again, joining the posse inconspicuously. And Jim felt certain that if he ever saw that man again, in the same light, at the same distance, in the same pose, head turned ever so slightly so that he saw only the tip of a nose in profile, he could say, "That's your skunk."

Ben argued with him. The sheriff argued with him. The sheriff said, "Well, even if you did claim to make such a recognition, I'm afraid no court would accept it as legal evidence." And after a moment's consideration, Jim guessed that the sheriff was right. The subject dropped. Jim forgot about it for a long time.

The next day the town buried the two Mexicans; the one who'd been killed inside the cabin during the battle; the other who'd been treacherously shot for some unaccountable reason by some member of the sheriff's posse. That day the sheriff divided the reward money for the Mexican's capture. Ben Rodney got half of it for his tip which had resulted in the second capture. Jim got the other half for his part in the first capture. Only Jim refused to touch his half. "Not after the way things finally ended up," he said. "I couldn't. It'd be blood money."

That night Ginny had a talk with Jim. "Jim," she asked him, "did you hesitate to go dancing with me, the other night, because you didn't think it'd be honorable to go out with another man's fiancée? Because if you did, Jim, I—I'm not engaged to Ben, any more. Ben and I had it out this morning—over that reward money. He took all of it, you know, after you refused your half in spite of my telling him I didn't want him to take any. Well, I reckon he cares more about money than he does about me. Ben and I are through, Jim. I've got an open date this next dance night."

Jim looked at her. If, for a long time, he hadn't dreamed that he was a romantic figure to Ginny, he realized it, now. Ginny was in love with him. Ginny was telling him so, in so many words. It was only a second before Jim answered her. But the second spun itself out endlessly. Once again he asked himself if he should make his confession to her. And then abruptly, something mighty and fierce and overpowering welled up in him. He asked himself why Ginny had to know that he'd been a bronc-rider who couldn't stand the gaff? What earthly difference did it make? What a crazy, idiotic fool he was, letting the memory of that red-devil horse stand between himself and lovely Ginny Adams. What if he did still have nightmares about the red outlaw? The bronc wasn't ever going to enter his life again, was it? He felt a weight suddenly lift from his shoulders as he saw the logic and the light. He couldn't ever be a bronc champion for Ginny. But what in hell reason did he have to think that

she'd ever want him to be a bronc champion?

Jim's face lit up, grinning. He asked Ginny lightly, "Why wait till dance night for a date? Why don't we go in to the movies tonight?"

So, they borrowed the Bar A buckboard and drove in to the movies that night. And, coming home in the moonlight, Jim let his arm slide along the back of the seat. Ginny melted into his embrace. Their lips touched; Jim held her tight, and she said, "Jim, I —I've been waiting so long for this," and Jim told her, "And I've been waitin', too, darling. All my life. . . ."

The rest of that week slipped past. Jim went to the bank and asked how good his credit was, and Claybank's banker said, "Top notch," so, Jim arranged to buy a tiny, two-bit ranch of his own on a shoe-string. He went to Ginny's dad and asked for the parental blessing, and old Dan Adams shook his hand and thumped him jovially on the back, and said, "Nothin' in the world could please me more, Jim."

Then Ginny's dad added, laughing, "Though I hope you won't git married before the rodeo's over, next month."

Jim blinked. "The rodeo? What's that got to do with—"

Dan Adams laughed again. "Oh, nothin'. Only, every year here at the Claybank rodeo I have a little side bet with my neighbor, old Lem Johnson, as to which of our two outfits will make the better showin'. And if you and Ginny got married and left the Bar A before the rodeo, I couldn't enter you on my team, savvy?"

Jim gulped. "You mean you—"

"I mean," old Dan told him affectionately, "I've got a danged good chance of winnin' that little side bet from Lem this year. We base this here competition on three events—the best bronc ride made by anybody on either outfit; the best time in the calf-ropin' and the best time in the steer-tyin'. And I was figgerin' on enterin' you in the—"

Jim waited an eternity, it seemed to him, to hear him go on. If the man said, "In the bronc-riding," what would he say? Then he heard old Dan saying: "In the calf-roping." And the life and the energy flowed back into him. The calf-roping! Ginny's dad wanted him merely for the calf-roping!

THAT next month went by swiftly, with picnics and barbecues in honor of Jim and Ginny. Ginny's dad and the town banker weren't the only people in the neighborhood, it seemed, who approved of the match. Everybody did. Everybody invited Jim and Ginny every place, and every place Jim went, folks congratulated him, and then said, "But you deserve every bit of your good luck, at that, boy." Sometimes when folks said that, it gave Jim a funny little feeling. Though he didn't know why it should. Hadn't he argued it all out? Satisfied himself that there was no earthly reason for ever telling Ginny or anybody else about a certain red horse that he'd never see again, anyway.

The month passed in a whirl of parties. Thanksgiving and Claybank's rodeo came before Jim knew it. Thanksgiving morning Jim found himself in the arena again after almost a year's absence. But simply as a calf-roper. He acquitted himself nobly that day. Roping and hog-tying his calf in fifteen seconds, he not only surpassed the performance of the man from Lem Johnson's outfit with whom he was competing for the sake of the Bar A, but he made a time that was a pretty good start, possibly, for the local championship in the event.

Dan Adams' steer-tying team didn't do so well, though. Shorty Madison got his big steer by the front legs on the first toss, but Curly Welch missed four consecutive tosses for the hind legs. Out on the field the whistle squawked. Dan's steer-tying team was ordered from the field with a time of "No Time" chalked up against it.

"Which means," Ginny observed to

Jim, "that unless Lem's steer-tying team gets into the same sort of trouble tomorrow or the next day, Lem's got that one event all sewed up. All he'd have to win to beat Dad would be one more event. While we've got to win two— The calf-roping with you and the bronc-riding with Ben Rodney."

Jim nodded. They were silent a couple of minutes. Then Ben Rodney came out on a big buckskin bronc and made an adequate, workman-like, albeit somewhat colorless ride. Lem's rider came out next on a big bay.

Ginny said, when Lem's rider was through, "Well, it was close. Not much to choose between those two rides. If it wasn't a draw, why neither man can be leading the other by more than a point or two."

Then abruptly, Ginny screamed and Jim sat there in the front row box, a cold horror gripping him. For the bay bronc carrying Lem's rider had been followed by a big strawberry roan bronc carrying one of the visiting professional riders. And now the bronc had thrown his rider hard enough to knock the man senseless, and was rearing over him, coming down, striking!

Pick-up riders swarmed in, mercifully blotted out the scene from the audience. The bell of the field ambulance clanged. Jim Baxter sat there, sick, weak, nauseated. Every broken bone in that poor man's body, he could feel himself. Every ache and agony that the man would suffer in the hospital. For he knew that red bronc. He'd ridden him twice, himself; once at Cheyenne, once at Tucson. Out there in the arena at Claybank, today, was being exhibited the same red bronc which had two strikes on Jim Baxter.

Jim closed his eyes. If he was a coward, he was a coward. All he knew was that he thanked God that he wasn't entered in the bronc competition.

The next day, Jim ran into hard luck. His calf darted sideways in the split-second that he made the toss with his rope. He missed the animal, had to shake out a second loop. He made his second toss in record time; if it had been his first, he'd have hung up some sort of record. As it was, his time altogether was thirty seconds. Thirty and fifteen averaged twenty-two and a half for the two days. The calf roper on Lem's outfit had a twenty each day to average twenty.

"It's going to be close," Ginny said after she'd watched both Ben Rodney and Lem's bronc-rider ride their broncs. "Neck and neck, with us needing two events and Lem needing only one. And nothing decided till after the final scores are posted tomorrow."

Jim agreed with her. It was going to be close. But he hadn't any idea then that anything important hung in the balance.

Jim rode into town that next morning with Ben Rodney. Oddly enough, Ben hadn't acted this past month the way a lot of men might have acted under the circumstances. Ben hadn't shown the least anger over Ginny's breaking her engagement and deciding to marry Jim. He'd even made a point of seeking Jim out, cultivating his friendship. He'd been talkative, locquacious with Jim; often brought up the subject of that night when the posse had captured the Mexicans for the second time, often prodded Jim with the question: "But why do you suppose anybody in the posse'd have been skunk enough to kill a man in the act of surrendering? Do you suppose it's true, what the sheriff thinks, that somebody in town was workin' with those bandits, giving 'em tips as to when and where to stage their hold-ups? That that somebody smuggled the saws to 'em in jail? And then, when the jail-break failed, deliberately killed that one man so's the man couldn't possibly ever squeal on him?" Jim had always answered, "Might be so." And Ben had always said, "Well, I'd like to lay my hands on the rattler. Boy, how I'd like to."

They talked, they chatted, this morning, Jim and Ben. About the hold-up, about the rodeo. They hit the asso-

ciation's town headquarters. The bronc drawings for the day had just been posted. Ben, it seemed, had drawn a horse named Fireball. Ben's forehead puckered. "Say," he said to Jim, "ain't Fireball the name of that red horse that—"

Jim nodded. "The red horse that sent Pete Magee to the hospital, Thursday," he agreed, "the red killer that jest missed blastin' the everlastin' daylights outa Joe Hammond, yesterday." He looked at Ben. He couldn't say that he liked Ben. Ben was a sort of cold, calculating fish. But in spite of his dislike of the man, he felt a sudden wave of sympathy for him.

Ben didn't seem to need sympathy though. Amazingly, Ben was grinning. "Well, that's what I call good luck," Ben declared. "It's been close, so far, between Lem's bronc-peeler and me; we've both drawed the same sort of horses, made the same sort of rides. But if I can ride that red-devil, Fireball, to a standstill, I've as good as won the bronc competition for the Bar A, ain't I?"

Jim winced. It was true enough what Ben said. If any man could display the nerve and the ability to ride Fireball until the whistle, he'd pile up plenty of points. More than enough to beat Lem's rider. Reluctantly, Jim surveyed Ben Rodney with awe. In spite of himself, he couldn't help comparing Ben's attitude with his own. He wondered how Ginny'd feel if she knew that Ben had eagerly, recklessly welcomed this chance to ride a horse that Jim Baxter was afraid of.

JIM BAXTER didn't feel so good at lunch that final day in the dining-room of the Palace Hotel with Ginny and her dad. Nor did he feel much better out at the arena, an hour and a half later. He'd come through with a time of twenty seconds on his calf. He'd won his event for the Bar A, because Lem's rider had taken twenty-six. But he couldn't take much joy out of having nosed Lem's rider out by a mere fraction of a point. Not with Ben out there, going to shoulder the real burden in just a minute.

He looked up to see Ben coming toward him. Ben was saying, "Look, Jim. I need your advice. I'm in a hell of a fix. You see—" And Ben was pouring forth his story. It seemed that after Ben had left Jim, that morning, he'd gone down to the doctor's to have a wrenched muscle in his back taped up. Only the doctor had insisted, according to Ben, upon giving him a thorough examination.

"And it seems," said Ben, "that these here first two days of bronc-bustin' have got me all stove up inside. Dunno what to do. Doc said I daren't ride. Hate to welch outa the ride with Dan bettin' five thousand dollars on the outcome of this here team competition."

Jim stared at Ben in astonishment. "F-five thousand dollars. But I thought—"

"It was a little friendly side-bet of a hundred dollars to begin with," Ben said. "Same as other years. But Lem got Dan's goat, hee-hawin' at him when Curly and Shorty rung up their 'No Time' in the steer-tyin'. Dan got hot under the collar, offered to bet real money he'd still win and Lem took him up on it."

THE loud-speaker out there on the field blared: "Jim Baxter, takin' Ben Rodney's ride, comin' out of chute number three on Fireball!" Jim poised himself there on top of the chute's timbering, ready to slip down into the saddle of the red bronc.

It had taken quick thinking on his part and Ben's. Ben hadn't thought to ask the doctor for a certificate attesting his injuries. "And they won't let you take my ride," Ben had said, "unless'n they're positive I'm hurt. Look, Jim, maybe the quickest way would be for you to give me a black eye. Then I'll lie down; pretend I'm badly hurt, and you can say to the officials, 'Somebody jest beat him up.

He ain't in no shape to ride. Let me take his place.'"

So they'd arranged it. Jim had shown Ben's prostrate form to the officials and was going to ride for Ben because Ben, injured, oughtn't to ride and couldn't—even if he did ride—ride as well as he should.

Somebody said, "Okay" and Jim slid down into the red devil bronc's saddle. The hombres who'd held the horse snubbed cast off their ropes. The animal reared, there in the chutes, just as he'd done at Cheyenne, at Tucson.

And in spite of himself, Jim felt cold terror flow up within him. He wasn't any braver than he'd been before, he guessed. The red bronc had two strikes on him. And third strike was out. He hadn't the nerve for it. And yet. . . . He felt his back strike against the chute's rear timbering. The crash stunned him; seemed to turn his whole body to jelly. Weakness and nausea welled up in him. He knew two things—that he wasn't going to be able to make the ride, and that in spite of everything he *had* to make it!

The wings flew open. The horse took him out into the arena in a terrific leap, lit with four stiff legs closely bunched, neck down. Jim felt the jolt all the way up his body to the top of his head. His eyes seemed to pop out. His brain whirled. His ears rang. He had the crazy feeling that the arena was spreading out—out—out; and that the horse on its next leap was taking him miles into the air. There was another shattering jolt, and another. The feeling went out of his knees. It amazed him how he was staying aboard without gripping. Or maybe he was gripping. He didn't know.

All he knew was that the bronc bucked and crow-hopped a thousand times. Then it commenced to twist and sunfish and did that for a million years. Then for another million years it pitched. He couldn't stay aboard. No man on earth could. Yet somehow, there he was still on the hurricane deck. "Got to stay," he kept telling himself, "got to whether you can or not." It ended finally, crazily. He went up—up—up in the air. He passed the moon and the stars. He came down—down—down—and lit, in of all crazy places, a bed!

He opened his eyes and looked up at Ginny. Ginny was showing him a check for the calf-tying championship he'd won, and telling him that he'd ridden Fireball for ten seconds after the whistle had blown. And Dan Adams was saying, "Well, I won my hundred dollars from Lem, but, you danged idiot, whatever possessed you to do it? I ordered Ben not to make the ride when he told me what horse he'd drawed. Whatever made you take it into your fool head to—"

Jim blinked. Dan had won only a hundred dollars? Not five thousand? Ben had been ordered not to make the ride? Ben's whole story to him about injuries was a wild cock and bull story? There was a lot that Jim didn't understand.

He was to understand it all, the next day, after Ben's disappearance. He was to put two and two together and comprehend abruptly: That the reason Ben had stood Ginny up one night was because Ben, that night, was helping the outlaws escape. That Ben had been the man in cahoots with the bandits, and that Ben was the hombre who'd cold-bloodedly shot the surrendering Mexican. It all clicked—even to Ben's making Jim volunteer to ride the red horse. Jim had said once that he'd be able to identify the skunk, and Ben was nervous. Ben had hoped that Jim would be killed up there aboard Fireball. Yep, the next day, talking it over with the sheriff, Jim got it all straight. And Jim got up out of his hospital bed, and was the hombre who trailed Ben and recklessly brought him back single-handed. But for the moment it was all too much for Jim.

He looked away from Dan, up at Ginny. Ginny was saying to her father, "Why did he do it? Why does he do everything he does, Dad? Because he's

brave. That's why." She bent down over his bed. He felt the softness of her lips on his lips. He tried to tell her that he hadn't been brave; that the red horse had thrown him twice and that he'd been scared to death of it even in his victory, this afternoon. But for some reason that merely seemed to make Ginny think that he'd been all the braver. He didn't argue it with her. He was too tired and too happy.

He said, "Well, if you still love me with all my faults, darling. . . ." and drew Ginny's lips close again to his.

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A trail herd drive hit by blizzard and bullets began a new partnership on the Swallowfork Ranch.

Roaring Wagon Wheels

By J. Edward Leithead

I

Bluff and Bullets

JACK DOONE, steel-eyed and gun-hung, wasn't expecting trouble as he loped into Moccasin Springs, though he carried the scars of last night's range battle with riders on his hide. It was the second attempted raid on the Spur D since he had leased grazing acres in the Shawnee Strip for his hundred-odd head of mixed Hereford stock, and big, blond Jack had a cankering suspicion that one of his neighbors, "Red" Slade, was behind the move to scare him out—or bury him!

This bright October morning, riding the main street of Moccasin Springs on the edge of the Strip, Jack was almost abreast of Doc Beckford's office when the door opened and a lanky man emerged, his left arm in a sling. The inch-deep dust had muffled Doone's approach until the long-geared hombre was outside. He turned a hawkish face and met Jack's chill eyes regarding him, with especial interest for the injured arm.

"Morey," said Doone grimly, checking rein, "howcome you to get hurt?

It must've happened since I saw you on the range yesterday!"

"Flash" Morey, fast with his guns and ramrod of Red Slade's Two Anchor spread, showed a curious mixture of apprehension and suppressed hostility. His good right hand strayed gunwards, then halted above lean hip.

Jack Doone's horse had stopped, and Jack unshipped his right foot from the stirrup, prepared to fling the leg back. Flash acted as though he might have been one of those hooded riders, many of whom were today wearing bullet brands worked by Spur D's defenders.

"Last night one of us boys boggled a shot that would've rid the country of a damn scoundrel, eh, Flash?" taunted Jack.

The betraying fires of hatred burst to livid life in Flash Morey's green eyes. His good hand snapped down and up—gun thunder shook up the echoes. But Morey's bullet ricocheted from the steel horn of an empty saddle. Jack Doone had rolled lithely down on the left side of his startled bronc.

As he ducked under the animal's neck, Jack's right hand was filled. Muzzle fire streaked at the Two Anchor gunman, as Flash swung again on his shifty target. But he screamed, dropped his six-shooter with the hammer uncocked. Lead had plowed through his shirt sleeve and the arm dangled.

"I ain't killin' cripples today, though it's comin' to you, Flash!" barked Doone. "Hello, Doc," he went on, as Doctor Beckford stuck his bald pate out of the door. "Work on any of the Two Anchor boys besides Morey?"

"Howdy, Jack," returned the medico. "Yeah, I did—"

"Where's the bunch, Flash? Cimarron Bar?" Doone cut in, glancing at Morey, who leaned against the office wall, white-lipped.

"Slade said they'd wait there," Doc Beckford answered for the foreman.

Doone pivoted, grabbed the reins of his roan and was up in a smooth swing of his hard body. Doc Beckford stared an instant at his departing back, then waddled forth to give Flash a helping hand inside.

Jack spied a huddle of broncs in the next block as he rode away from Beckford's, and knew the animals were hitched in front of the Cimarron Bar. Doubtless the mounts of Slade's riders. Jack took up the gun he had used, to fill the fired chamber. Then a feminine voice hailed him and he turned in the leather, for the first time noticing a familiar buckboard and team at the provision store curbside.

"Morning, cowman! You in that shooting?"

A girl, with a golden-tinted oval face, wearing a blue flannel man's shirt, tan skirt and star-topped half-boots, was heading out of the store. Her flat-crowned felt hat, wide of brim, was crushed down on a thick cluster of dark-brown curls. Julia Calder was the prettiest girl in the Shawnee Strip, her dad one of the bigger stockmen. Until six months since, Jack Doone had prodded beef for Calder's Swallowfork spread, then started on his own in order to have something to offer the delectable Julia besides a ring for her finger.

The grimness of Jack's bronzed face melted momentarily. "'Lo, Julie! Can't stop now. Had another fight at the Spur last night, and the movin' finger points right at Mr. Redhead Slade!"

She ran into the street, though he gave no sign of stopping. "Good grief, Jack! Slade's got five or six men with him. Saw them go by. You're not going to brace the gang alone?"

"Ain't I?" He twisted to look back at her and grin; there was a threat for Slade and his crew in that show of teeth. "This payoff has been long comin', honey!"

"Wait, Jack, wait!" But her entreaty fell on ears for once deaf to anything that Julia Calder could say. A moment she stood indecisive, as he made the

street crossing into the next block, steering for those racked horses by the Cimarron Bar. "I'll get the sheriff!" she resolved, and whirled in the direction of the county jail.

The jail stood in easy earshot of those booming guns, and, had she stopped to think, the girl would have realized Sheriff Simcoe's failure to appear was due to absence from town. Only the peg-legged jailer was in Simcoe's office. The information that he expected sheriff and deputy to return any time was of small benefit to Julia in her need. She fled again to the street, regaining self-control with the knowledge that if big Jack were to receive the help he surely needed, it was up to Julia Calder herself.

As she went to the buckboard for her father's Winchester, Julia's gaze thrust upstreet. There was no sign of Jack, but his horse was reined behind the broncs at the saloon rack. No sound of a rumpus, either, and that was nearly as disconcerting as the muffled reverberation of guns. The weight of the six-shooter burdening her hip was reassuring, and though she had never shot at any kind of target but rattlers or coyotes, Julia Calder moved under the spell of a militant urge as she seized the Winchester and darted for the corner.

Doone, meantime, after checking rein before the Cimarron Bar and seeing the grouped horses bore Slade's brand, should have been warned by the fact that none of the Two Anchor boys were visible. The echoes of his gun-clash with Flash Morey certainly had reached them.

Ignoring the suspicious quiet of the saloon front, fingertips brushing gun-stocks, Jack barged into the barroom. The sudden gloomy interior bothered his eyes only a moment. Looking straight at the bar, his cold-eyed gaze locked instantly with the narrow-lidded one of Red Slade. Older than Doone, not so tall, but equally powerful with his wide shoulders and flat flanks, Slade's hat was shoved off his angular face, allowing a lock of brick-red hair to droop across damp forehead.

"Well," he demanded curtly, "who you tryin' to stare down, long-shanks?"

"The night-runnin' wolf that's fanged my outfit twice!" snapped Jack, and halted, wondering suddenly where were the rest of Red's men. Two only sided Red at the bar, in falsely lazy poses. "I'm here for the payoff, Red. After the first attempt to hamstring us, I began figurin'—"

"No use goin' into that!" Red Slade gritted. "You seen Flash and you talked to Doc Beckford, all right!" He spread his hands, as if confident he would not have to defend his life, though Doone stood menacingly ten feet away. "Plenty cattle turns up missin' in the Strip, about the time a forty-dollar cowhand starts gatherin' a herd. We don't like hungry loopers so close to Two Anchor, and bein's you've got the backin' of Adam Calder, we have to take our own measures for protection."

Cold rage swept Doone. "So that's why you're tryin' to crowd me out—callin' me a thief when you're one yourself and I'm liable to learn it, with our boundaries overlappin'. The bluff won't stand up, Red. Throw your gun!"

A gun boomed, but Slade hadn't moved hand to hip. Nor had the men beside him. Jack Doone's hands clamped the butts of his six-shooters for swift slinging, as his battered Stetson was knocked over one eye. That shot had whipped from behind. He half-turned, disliking to let Slade out of eye-range. Flanking the front wall, away from the window aperture, were the other four Slade men, one crouched with a smoking Colt to the fore.

"Paw up, or I'll let you have it!" came a snarl from the bent figure.

Trapped in a cross-fire should the three at the bar open up, Doone met the play with reckless abandon. His upswinging gun belched smoke. Flashes of death lashed two ways as one of Slade's cowboys' checkers tripped hammer again. He was a halved second

slow, and pitched forward uttering an animal-like cry.

The thud of his landing scarcely had sounded before Doone, swiveling, threw flame at Slade. But the trio at the bar were alert, guns in fists. Red stooped, and the bullet meant for him crashed into the wall. His gun slanted up as he jack-knifed on his spurs. To right and left of Red, his body-guards were churning smoky lead. Two bullets hit the dodging Doone, one in the shoulder, spinning him. It was lucky he spun, for the shot from Red's gun barked the side of Jack's head instead of plowing through. The hammer-like blow snatched away Doone's senses. He folded at the knees and slammed to the floor, guns sliding.

"Squared the deal for Checkers," grunted Slade, rising, and referring to his slain puncher.

But a man jumped from the wall, scooped up Doone's hardware, and, still bent down, yammered, "Wrong, Red! His clock's tickin'."

A rough hand parted Jack's crimsoned hair to reveal the track of the bullet. Slade leaned to look, straightened with an unholy light in his eyes. Doone revived to dull comprehension of his surroundings as Slade hauled him upright and against the bar. Shooting pains in Jack's hurt shoulder hastened his recovery. He thrust Slade back powerfully with the better arm. Slade didn't track quickly enough, and an uppercut bounced off his blocky chin.

Half-dazed, Slade righted himself and poked his Colt in the pit of Jack's stomach. Then doggedly shaking his head, he muttered, "No! We'll hang you! Rope is for rustlers. The sheriff ain't here, and we'll leave you danglin' to show Andy Simcoe where to look for the rest of the stock thieves!"

At a signal from Slade, they swarmed once more on the weaponless Doone. Legs braced, his rock-hard fists flailed, despite a pain-stabbing shoulder. Slade cursed his resistance. "Bat him with a gun!" he bawled, then hunched and wheeled as a voice spoke from the open doorway:

"Give him air, boys, or somebody drops!"

Every eye flickered to the source of that command, almost doubting the feminine tone until they beheld the trim figure backed by sunlight. Flanking the Winchester, Julia Calder stepped in and to one side.

"I mean I'll shoot!" she insisted sharply, when the group around Doone failed to disintegrate. "Red Slade, you're number one if—"

Slade looked at first angry; then amused, even admiring. "You've spunk!" he conceded; then aside, to his men, "Break ranks, boys. Doone can't get away. Let's see how the filly aims to play out her string!"

Booted feet scuffed left and right, leaving the disheveled Jack standing in a cleared space. He was as surprised as any of his enemies by Julia's intervention, but the risk she took worried him. Clamping rifle against hip with one hand, the girl plucked the sixgun from her holster, tossed it. Slade moved as if to intercept the weapon spinning straight at Jack Doone. The Winchester spanged and the Two Anchor boss jerked his arm down, his features twisting in a devilish grimace.

"You would drill me, you wildcat!"

She flipped the Winchester's lever with a quick hand—that was her answer. Jack Doone had caught the thrown gun. Hammer cocked, he walked the short lane formed by his enemies, doorward, about-facing at Julia's side.

"I'll take it," he told her, gaze never quitting the tense Two Anchor men.

Jack detected the flashing movement of arms as his spurred heels hit the stoop planking. He slashed fire into the barroom and a cry of pain lifted. Next instant he had leaped to the shelter of the outer wall, grabbing Julia with his free hand and forcing her to her knees. Lead whistled through the deserted doorway and a horse at the rack jumped, whinnied shrilly.

"Run!" Jack jerked the girl to her feet, gave her a firm push.

"And leave you here?" she swung about, her eyes accusing. "That would be a swell way to treat a pal!" She caught his arm despairingly. "Run with me, Jack."

"You did me a fine turn, Julia," he held back, "but I'll never run from that gang."

Soft chink of spurs by the distant door spun Jack around. Half of a man's vicious face and a gun-gripping hand were revealed. Jack shot and drove the fellow inside, howling. Her back to Jack, Julia Calder was focusing her rifle on the nigh window. A face pressed to the dusty pane, vanished at sight of the alert range girl.

While the hostile parties stood deadlocked, hoofbeats roared along the main street. Doone faced the wrong way to see who was coming, but Julia's cry, "Sheriff Andy!" answered his unspoken question. Yet the Spur D owner did not change his position until three horsemen pulled up in a swirl of dust near the hitch-rack.

"What's this all mean, Doone?" gruffed Andy Simcoe, squinting at the brand on the tied horses. "You and Slade stagin' a private war?"

"Passel of cow thieves in yonder, sheriff," protested Doone.

"That's a lie!" yelled Red Slade, charging out with gun upraised, his men trooping after. "Doone hisself is the crooked son, and he pegged out Checkers!"

Six-shooters leaped to the sheriff's capable hands, his deputy ranged up beside him with filled fingers, while the third rider, a stranger, looked on with lively interest.

"Leather your guns!" Sheriff Simcoe ordered, sweeping the group of men impartially, "Or I'll toss you all in the can, 'ceptin' Miss Julia. Child, you got no business in this," and Sheriff Andy freed one hand of iron to thumb his graying mustache. "Miss Julia, suppose you tell it," he flashed a glance at Julia.

Julia did, covering as much as she knew of the sudden outbreak. She ended: "Jack shot Checkers to defend himself."

The sheriff said:

"Listen to me, now, you gun-throwers. I take Miss Julia's word for what happened, but you fellows quit this gunning business in my town. If it wasn't I've got important news that's goin' to shake this country up its ridgepole, I'd jug the lot of you right now.

"The Government is openin' the Shawnee Strip to homesteaders, and all the cattle outfits have got to pack out in the next thirty days. Except your dad, of course," the sheriff's gaze slid to Julia's intent face.

Those present understood why Adam Calder was the exception to an order of such far-reaching consequences. He owned his range, was the only rancher in the Strip who did. First settler in that section, when it had been a sort of outlaws' haven, Calder had held the grass and water originally filed on for forty years. To rout out the law dodgers, the Government had leased to other cattlemen all the range bordering Calder's; and now that it was no longer a hide-away ground for bandits, the homesteaders were to be let loose on its fertile acres.

"Maybe you'd like to hear the President's proclamation read by U. S. Marshal Bent, yonder," Simcoe indicated the quiet-looking stranger.

The Federal officer reined forward, unfolding a paper. He had a bundle of such notices in his saddle-bags, waiting to be posted inside the Strip and out. He read the astounding and disrupting proclamation which sounded the death knell of herding in the old Indian lands.

The men were stunned by the news. This meant a complete change of their lives. Their range open to homesteaders! It was incredible!

Red Slade pounded for the hitch-rack, cursed, then shouted, "Let's go! Drag out Checkers and we'll pick up Flash on the way home!"

Flinging clots of dust, the Two Anchor outfit spilled down the street, Checkers tied in his saddle. Jack went to his horse, caught up the open reins, and with Julia beside him walked toward the buckboard by the provision store.

"Where'll all those outfits find other range, Jack?" the girl exclaimed. "It means uprooting, lock, stock and barrel, and they'll be driving just as the late November blizzards set in."

II

White Hell

THE SWALLOWFORK home ranch lay between Moccasin Springs and Jack's Spur D, and he stopped there to consult his old boss, Julia's father. Calder had some cattle on leased territory that must be rounded up.

"We'll be crowded, but you come in with me, Jack," old Adam said at once. "You see how a little foresight, years ago, helps now? I'll be here at the old stand when every neighbor is gone —but it's a blasted shame!"

Thirty days to locate free range and move out! It seemed an impossible task, was going to ruin more than one outfit. Jack gloomily brought in his hundred head of whitefaces to Swallowfork, all plans for a ranch of his own disrupted, and rode in the Calder round-up as of old.

United States Marshal Bent, assisted by Sheriff Simcoe and deputies, was endlessly in the saddle, seeing to it that no outfit lagged. Official pressure wasn't necessary. The threat of coming winter was driving the cowmen to almost frenzied activity.

On a certain fall day, Adam Calder, Julia and Jack Doone sat their horses on a ridge summit and watched the dust of the last of their neighbors' herds fade into the west. Their mood was melancholy, none could find words to express his or her feelings. Barring the deep-rooted Swallowfork spread, sundown would see the Shawnee Strip a desolate range. Two days before, Red Slade's outfit was supposed to have headed for range in Old Mexico.

But the last had not been seen of Red. He was just over the Oklahoma-Texas line, establishing a cow camp in hilly country where storms could not scatter his stock. For Red, always covetous of Calder's holdings, was planning on a bold scale. Nothing less than to take possession of Swallowfork Ranch—after its man-power had been lured to destruction by his guns.

From the astute viewpoint of Slade, whose cunning had enabled him to steal regularly from his Strip neighbors without being caught, his scheme was not a foolish dream, but had every chance of success. The great exodus had set the stage for a coup which he would not have thought of otherwise; and in the shadow of the Texas hills he worked out the details, grooming one "Fats" Shindler, a jovial renegade who had handled the stock he stole, for an important rôle.

It was a mid-October day, with the earth a warm russet brown, when Fats Shindler, on a powerful bay, arrived at Swallowfork Ranch. He came across the range from the direction of town, encountering the boss and Jack Doone tailing up critters which, weakened by the battle against the long cold, had lain down in the deceptive warmth.

Both cowmen were sweating copiously, coats off, as they faced the fat and perspiring newcomer.

"That's tol'able heavy work," greeted Shindler, with his most infectious grin. "Like to get rid of some of your beef stuff?"

"You a buyer?" asked Adam Calder, tipping his hat forward and eying the big man shrewdly.

Representing himself as agent for the Navajos on the Big Rock Reservation, in the northwest corner of New Mexico, Shindler stated word had reached him of the exodus from the

Shawnee Strip and it looked like an opportunity to buy up cattle cheap for beef issue to the Government wards.

"You're about a month too late," Calder informed him. "There was plenty cows to be had for a song—"

"Yeh, they told me at Moccasin Springs," Shindler cut in. "But I thought it was sixty days the cattlemen had to get out, instead of thirty. Fellow at the Springs said I might strike a deal with you, as you were kind of crowded for range. How about it?"

"Winter'll be here before you know it. This is no time to make a trail drive," Adam Calder demurred.

"Snows won't be here for a month yet," Shindler objected.

Calder glanced at Doone, who had ridden up. "Wouldn't be a bad way to work off some of our surplus. Save money drivin', instead of shippin', too."

"Sounds all right to me," agreed Jack. "Ought to make it before snows set in."

At the ranch house that night, a deal was closed for five hundred cattle at a satisfactory figure. Shindler, having had shady dealings with the real agent at Big Rock in the past, could show credentials which appeared to establish his identity. Calder and even Doone, were prone to a slight carelessness on that point, since Shindler advanced half the purchase price in cash, the rest to be paid on delivery. Red Slade had supplied the money; but, knowing that Calder's "bank" was an old-fashioned safe in the office of the ranch, the boss rustler had no doubt of recovering it, and more besides, when he took over the Swallowfork.

Calder told his departing guest, in the morning, that the herd should be on the trail by November first. Julia Calder asked, as the fat shoulders of Shindler bobbed away toward Moccasin Springs:

"Who's staying home when you roll out, Dad?"

"Why," Calder brushed his horn mustaches with brisk fingers, "you and old Tim Barbazon, and the Chink cook and two-three hands. We'll need most of 'em to handle the herd, specially if the weather turns bad again."

"Your mistake, Dad," she told him with a twinkling eye. "Boots and saddle for this range gal! My friends have all gone, and I don't fancy spending the rest of my winter evenings playing checkers with the boys!"

Ten days of good weather—for western Oklahoma, subject to great extremes of temperature—and the Swallowfork herd was on the trail with the cattle sold to Shindler. Driving hard, the outfit had hopes of reaching the Texas Panhandle in good time. But, sixty miles from that goal set by Doone, who was drive boss, a leaden sky hung above the moving backs of five hundred cattle. A keen wind brought the threat of an early snow storm.

Jack prodded relentlessly, covered better than twelve miles that day. It was early for winter to be setting in; but before dark descended, big, soft flakes were filling the air. The trail drivers turned up the collars of sheep-lined sourdough coats, glad they weren't in the teeth of the north wind. It was bad enough keeping the cattle in the westward course, when the critters wanted to shift south, tails to the cold blast.

Julia Calder was tooling the bed-wagon, with the chuck wagon just ahead. Something had to be done; they couldn't drive cattle in weather like this. Finding a camp-site worthy the name in the snow-spotted gloom was well near impossible. But the outfit halted by the first ice-scummed creek, where a few leafless trees barely broke the wind's force. The cattle spread out on the flat, too uneasy in that unprotected spot to feed at once, though grass was easily reached through the thin coating of snow.

While fairly dry wood was available, the teamster cook lugged it in by the creek bank, and helped Julia start a roaring blaze. Her father, Jack and the seven cowhands stuck to wet sad-

dles, out where the herd was restively cracking horns and ankle joints. In pairs the men rode back to the welcome fire, for scalding coffee and hot food, then jingled softly into the white veil of snow. The snow fell heavily now and the wind whirled it. They were caught—no doubt about it now—in a real blizzard.

Julia Calder drew a cold-stiffened and exhausted body into the hoodlum wagon, and lay down, fully clothed, with the extra covering of her father's buffalo overcoat. She was so tired, and so busy thinking of the men riding out the storm's fury, that she couldn't sleep. They would be fighting the drifts on the march next day and progress would be miserably slow if not blocked altogether.

The girl slept at last. But the dull, seemingly far-off popping of firearms pulled her bolt upright with a chill of apprehension. She peered from the rear of the wagon, buffalo coat clutched tight over her breast. The fire was dying and she must have slept a couple of hours. Did that booming of six-guns, continuing in the direction of the flat, proclaim that a down-wind drift of the stock had begun? Cookie was on his feet by the chuckwagon.

"Power of yellin' and shootin' over yonder, Miss Julia," said the oldster, as the girl slid into view. "Might be the cattle are breakin' way, but I don't hear 'em moanin' and I kinda smell an attack of some kind."

"Who'd attack us?" She dropped the big coat, fed sticks to the fire. "On a night like this!"

III

Range Girl Unafraid

BIG JACK DOONE had been equally puzzled when the first gun blazed in the haze of snowfall. He realized better than any that they were caught in a blizzard and terribly handicapped. But he ripped his coat open as the bullet grazed his cheek, flipped out his guns. The blot of a horseman was moving down there, south of the formless herd. Shots and leather-lunged shouts reached him from other points, and he knew the herd was being jumped by trail thieves. But who were they?

Doone drove lead at his attacker; the raider wheeled off, shoulders bowed, but fire still flowered from his Colt muzzle. Jack skinned disaster, riding low, heard the bawl of a cow somewhere behind. The cow had taken the bullet. The rumble of spooky stock, shuffling forward in large groups or charging crazily about in smaller bunches, presaged a wild bolt.

Riding clear of the trampling ranks, Jack pistoled the raider out of leather and shifted aim to fire across the leaders' faces, as the stampede picked up speed. But he swiveled at a blast of gun-fire on his flank. More horsemen were breaking through the wall of snow.

"Red Slade!" Jack yelled, on a wild guess, his thumbs striking the hammer-prongs as his horse swung under biting steel. One figure slewed, tilted slowly groundward. The other two charged on, guns flaming, and the shout of one came flatly to Doone:

"Here's what I owe you, Doone! And Slade's gone to git your girl!"

He recognized Flash Morey's voice. Squeezing triggers, barely with time for aiming, Jack knocked Morey to the offside of his mount. The Two Anchor gun boss clung by an arm and a leg, vanished in the blinding swirl of flakes, trailed by his lone companion.

Jack Doone, feverishly reloading, pivoted his bronc and hung in the spurs. Let the cattle go to hell, since it was a choice between them and Julia's safety! He skimmed north over slidy ground, every minute expecting to pile up. Like a phantom herd, the cattle drifted by him in the dark, tails spiked up. He approached fighting men of whom he was scarcely aware, with the campfire's beacon in

his eyes. But a familiar hail, desperately keyed, split his attention and checked his lunging ride:

"Jack! Jack! Slade's men . . . stealin' the herd. . . . Git in this, Jack!"

Doone discerned a broad back in point-blank range of his swiveling guns. The owner of it turned at Adam Calder's cry, pistol slanting upward. Gun lightning struck the great girth of chest, downing him. Struck again at other furtive man-shapes. Fire unraveled at Jack from the splitting group, but his tallying shots had opened the way for Calder to emerge, swinging an empty gun.

Jack spurred on up the frozen creek, leaving the old cowman to tail him. Six-shooters and a carbine were making a hellish din around the timber stand. The silhouettes of men firing from the outskirts, partly protected by a snowbank, held Jack's attention. He left the saddle, crouched and stabbed fresh loads in his guns. Then, inching forward, he opened fire.

A rustler fell kicking, soon to lie still. Another, on his knees, straightened and dived for a tree trunk. But lead halted him a yard short of his objective, and he sank back with breath whistling through a hole in a lung.

Jack came to his feet and, slipping and sliding, gained the trees. His darting gaze tagged Slade and another man about to invade the hoodlum wagon, one from each end. From under the chuck wagon, resting on a wheel spoke, was thrust a rifle—silent now, for the cook had racked his chips. Two of Calder's cowhands sprawled near the fire.

Slogging past the fire, Jack lined up his guns on the raider closest to him, who stood balanced on the wagon-tongue. Down he came, while, from the rear of the hoodlum wagon, Slade's shooting-iron flamed. Intending to shoot and duck behind the wagon, Slade wasn't quick enough to beat Doone's lead. He staggered, grabbed the rim of a rear wheel for support. But Jack himself showed signs of unsteadiness. Blurred gaze on the reeling Jack, Slade saw him pitch flat just as Adam Calder appeared in the campfire light, sliding from his horse with sixgun to the fore. Slade steadied his Colt, firing before Calder caught sight of him. There was a muffled scream from the wagon as the Swallowfork owner sagged down.

Slade felt his strength ebbing; and while Julia thrust the gun she had secured over the tail-gate, the boss rustler whipped a shot at her and went lurching into the gloom. There weren't many of his gang in condition to follow him. Yet Slade was sure he had accomplished his chief object in decoying the Swallowfork spread on the drive trail. He had wanted the girl alive, without considering just how he should dispose of her afterward. But she had fought him off; and if his last hasty shot hadn't killed her, likely she would never survive the blizzard.

Though she had escaped Slade's bullet, save for a trifling wound where it crossed her forearm, Julia Calder's plight was desperate. Utterly alone, she had two seriously injured men on her hands, her father and Jack. Taxing supple strength to the limit in dragging them into the bed-wagon, she was scarcely aware of another day's coming. The raging storm held them prisoners as effectually as four stone walls. Jack's and Calder's saddle broncs, and the two wagon teams, shared their isolation.

Jack was first to regain consciousness, as Julia tended both as best she could. He was shot in the breast, as was Calder. Making light of his wound, Doone insisted on bucking the drifts and blinding flakes in mid-afternoon, to learn what had befallen herd and cowhands. He was all in when he fought his way back to camp after dark. A few cattle, slowly freezing to death, were all he had found and had promptly given them mercy shots.

He keeled over by the fire, and could do little for himself when Julia helped

him toward the wagon. That night his labored breathing and high fever warned the girl that pneumonia had set in, brought on by his chest wound and exposure. Her father refused to rally. Julia was on the edge of despair but, with the courage of the range-born, she would not let fear intrench itself in her heart.

A drop to sub-zero temperature, accompanied by pallid sunshine, ushered in the following day, and Julia hitched up. She had no clear idea of where she was, but hoped to strike a town somewhere before night. Both Jack and her father would die unless they received medical attention very shortly. Abandoning the chuck wagon, she first loaded supplies from it into the bed-wagon, and the extra horses she strung on rope at the tail-gate. Nothing could have induced her to leave any animal to its fate in the white waste. She made the two men in the wagon as comfortable as possible.

To prevent snow blindness, Julia put circles of black around her eyes from the fuel of her breakfast fire, and mounted to the wagon-seat. She tried to drive carefully so as not to jar the desperately ill men. Once beyond the half-sheltered creek, she seemed to be adrift in a frozen wasteland; but she kept her chin up and guided the team into all lanes where wind action had kept the snow from heaping more than hub-high. Sometimes drifts were unavoidable, and plowing through them wore the horses down. If Swallow-fork punchers or cattle had survived, by any miracle, the evidence was lacking.

She thought forlornly, "In the spring there'll be a harvest of bones in these parts. How awful!"

Julia drove north, because in that direction lay the railroad, how many miles she was unable to say accurately. If she struck the rails and followed them east or west, she should in time arrive at some town. There was danger of her missing the railroad if the tracks were buried deep; she tried to push the thought of becoming lost in that wilderness of dazzling white away from her.

The wind was bitter and she faced its full sweep. Often she clamped the reins between her knees, while the team toiled onward, and beat her gloved hands together. Yet the cold seemed to knife right through her warm clothing. Once or twice she halted, groped back in the wagon-bed to see how her patients were faring. It seemed as though her father was breathing now as heavily as Jack, and he had a temperature. He was an old man and the battle against pneumonia would be harder for him than for Doone. She choked back her sobs.

By the sun it was late afternoon when Julia hooked a fresh team on the pole and haltered the exhausted pair behind. She was weary with looking for sign of railroad tracks or an isolated town, and getting numb from cold. As she drove on, with darkness coming down, the horses stumbled a little, and then the wheels bumped hard over some obstruction. Hope flamed through her chilled body—she was crossing railroad tracks, well hidden by the snow mantle. Obviously there had been no snow plough through this section since the blizzard ceased.

Not knowing whether the nearest town was east or west, she turned east. Perhaps because her home in the Strip lay that way, with many miles between. She swung parallel with the hidden rails. The fresh horses made better progress with the wind striking them broadside. But, traveling on in the semi-gloom, hour after hour, Julia's hopes began to fade. No welcoming light beamed out of the dark. The rails being invisible, possibly she had wandered off the road.

Half-frozen, assailed by a deadly drowsiness induced by cold and fatigue, her tired eyes still strained for a sight of human habitation. Her head bowed. . . . She awoke with a startled jerk—sleep would be fatal, to herself and those in her care.

Then Julia saw a light, far ahead; and, her mind helplessly wondered if it was real or a delusion. Her arms were too stiff to apply the whip, but she flapped the reins, cried out and kept her gaze riveted to that spark. It grew, and other sparks were added to it in time. How long it was before she entered a street, driving down the middle between snowbanks, she could not have told. She was almost at the last gasp, and bewildered by the sudden clamor of voices close at hand. The reins went down and she dropped from the wagon-seat. Helping hands dragged her upright.

Through stiff lips she framed the words: "In the wagon—two sick men —get a doctor!"

Then Julia collapsed unconscious in the arms supporting her.

IV

The Gun-fanged Wolf

OLD TIM BARBAZON kicked the muddy snow from high-heeled boots and entered the bunkhouse with concern deeply etched in mahogany features. The three cowhands left behind with Tim, Swallowfork foreman, glanced up casually, then tensed at the look on the ramrod's face. He was holding a telegram in ungloved hand.

"It's lucky I went to town!" Tim exclaimed. "What d'you reckon has happened to our folks?"

He didn't wait for the cowboys to surmise, but read from the yellow sheet, a message signed with Julia Calder's name. It was nearer three weeks than two since the drive had rolled out, but Barbazon hadn't expected to hear from the trail drivers until they returned some time in early December. News of the disaster had shocked him, as it now shocked the punchers listening to his slow drawl.

Without reference to Slade's attack, Julia's message stated that men and cattle had been lost in the storm, her father, Doone and herself alone surviving. Both men were desperately ill of pneumonia, in addition to serious gunshot wounds, and she was suffering with frozen hands and feet. But they were receiving all attention possible in the small cattle and rail town of Muscatine, up in the northwest. Tim was to wire her money to defray expenses.

Barbazon tucked the telegram in his coat pocket, eying the speechless cowboys. "Ain't that double hell! Wonder what she means by gunshot wounds. Did rustlers jump 'em? Well, she'll write. The boss and Jack won't be back for calf round-up, if they pull through at all, and seven good boys gone! But the important thing right now is to send the money."

It was near dusk when he arrived home with his ill tidings. He left the bunkhouse abruptly, hurrying across the muddy yard, all unconscious of a band of horsemen approaching from the west. The snow, except on the high hills, had thinned to a patchy coating, for milder weather had trailed in the wake of the blizzard. Barbazon entered the ranch house, steering directly for Calder's office and shouting his news to Wong the cook. As the trusted right-hand man of Calder, old Tim knew the safe's combination, and he had just swung back the heavy door when several shots cracked out in the direction of the bunkhouse.

He leaped up in amazement, brushing by the chattering Wong; and had got as far as the front steps when he noticed horses by the bunkhouse and several men striding toward him, eight or nine of them. Tim snatched out his gun, turned to face them with thoughts of cattle raiders racing through his mind. A gun spat redly, and Tim fired back. But he was going down as he touched trigger, and that was the last he knew until an hour later.

He opened his eyes in the living-

room, to see Red Slade bending over him. In the outlaw's hand was the telegram from Julia.

"It's bull luck I didn't kill you, Tim," were Slade's first words, his face a study in unleashed wrath. "I see, here, that my plans misfired a bit. I thought the trail outfit was dead, even to the girl. Yeah, I'll have use for you."

Barbazon's gaze traveled about the room, taking in the hard faces flanking Slade, pausing longest on the moon face of Fats Shindler and the hawkish one of Flash Morey. "What plans?" Tim spoke weakly. "Mean to say you attacked Calder, you damned wolf? And what's that cattle agent for the Navajos doin' here?"

Slade's eyes burned. "Gettin' smart, huh? Sure, Fats is my man. We just gunned your boys in the bunkhouse! And you'll live just as long as you behave."

Barbazon listened, scarcely believing his ears, as Slade unfolded his plot to steal the Swallowfork.

"I'm pretty fair imitatin' handwritin'; it's what first got me buckin' the law," Slade admitted shamelessly. "Plenty specimens of Calder's hand hereabouts and I aimed to forge a bill of sale to show inquirin' folks. That'll come later. Right now you've hired me and my boys, who lost their herd in the blizzard, to ride as extra hands. Savvy?"

Barbazon started to curse him, then decided he could gain nothing by goading the outlaw to murder him on the spot. The game wasn't in Slade's bag yet!

Red himself realized that. But, the gang having added five notches to its guns in the past ten hours, no telegram was going to make him give up the long chance of holding the ranch. Calder and Doone might never recover, and if the girl returned alone, there were ways of handling her. His first move was to keep Julia from suspecting his presence here while she was up at Muscatine, out of reach.

To that end, comprehending the meaning of the open safe in the office, Slade forced the feverish Barbazon into the saddle next morning and rode with him to the telegraph office in Moccasin Springs. He stood beside Tim while money and a message were telegraphed to Julia Calder—Barbazon, defenseless with empty gun in holster, sending word that all was well at the ranch and asking to be informed of the patients' progress.

Afterward, Slade showed himself around town with Tim, who choked over the lie that Slade was helping out at Swallowfork. Once Red caught him trying to whisper to one of a group of men who were loudly discussing the early morning discovery that Sheriff Simcoe and his first deputy, with their mounts, were lying dead in an arroyo west of town. Drygulched. Red, intercepting that whispered appeal, prodded Barbazon to his horse, and they left town.

"You killed Simcoe and his deputy?" Tim demanded, on the road home.

Slade grinned wolfishly. "They suspected me, hombre! Say, it's lucky Julia Calder didn't mention my name in her telegram."

It had been an oversight on the ailing girl's part, and the writing of the message had been intrusted to the doctor attending them. But later, when Julia had the use of her hands, a bulky letter arrived for Tim Barbazon, explaining in full Slade's part. And Slade, who appropriated all the ranch mail, chuckled when he read it. He replied by telegram, signing Barbazon's name. As the foreman was a lamentably poor writer, Julia thought nothing of not receiving a letter instead. After Tim's attempt to whisper in town, Red was disinclined to take him to Moccasin Springs, and, had it not been for the possibility of using him later, he would have served the old foreman as he had the three cowpunchers.

The work was capably handled at Swallowfork, and the opening of the Shawnee Strip, in early spring, drew

near. A disturbing letter arrived from Julia. Her father and Jack, safely over pneumonia, were mending of their wounds, slowly but certainly. She said they would not be able to travel for several months.

The homesteaders were drifting in to await the opening, and Red counted on the crowds and confusion to mask his final desperate play to hold the ranch. He wired Julia, still signing Tim's name, to let him know just when to expect them, as the outfit was planning a welcome such as she had never dreamed of. Moccasin Springs was not on the railroad. They would have to travel horseback from Ponca, the old shipping point ten miles north, a route over which hundreds of fresh arrivals to swell the homesteader horde trailed daily, by wagon, horse and foot.

The magic date of the land opening approached, and with it a crisis in Slade's affairs. He had got word that the Calders and Doone would arrive by way of Ponca just thirty-six hours ahead of the signal gun, and Flash Morey, with two gun-tough pals, hit leather past the troopers guarding the borders of the Strip. The patrol wasn't bothering about riders leaving the area; orders were to prevent anyone from entering, for numerous "sooner" outfits and land speculators would otherwise have invaded the Strip and staked the choice claims.

Flash and his pards, en route to ambush the Calders and Doone, halted long enough in Moccasin Springs to fortify themselves with whiskey. The town was filled to the saturation point with settlers, and boomer camps were established thickly on the outskirts. Besides the land hunters, less desirable elements had drifted in. Horse thieves abounded, turning killers in several instances, for any sort of a mount brought a good price; and Slade was gambling that the gun-work of his henchmen on the Ponca trail would be laid to these uncaught horse stealers.

Flash Morey had been told to ride wide of the Springs, not to show himself there; but, with headstrong indifference to orders, he lingered at the Cimarron Bar. His horseman's dislike of lowly plowmen came to the surface when a boomer jogged his elbow. But, as he laid hands to guns, half a dozen homesteaders ganged him to the floor and a free-for-all resulted, interrupted by citizen deputies who promptly landed the three troublemakers in the calaboose.

Late that afternoon three riders in cow-country garb paused on the edge of town and viewed with astonishment the milling thousands awaiting restively the run on the morrow.

Adam Calder turned to his daughter and Jack Doone. "Hell, it looks like everybody in the U. S. A. was camped here! We'll never find Barbazon. Let's ride down to the ranch."

The two men were more gaunt than usual, the deep bronze of their faces had faded somewhat; but they were as sound as ever. Julia was her old lovely self, bright-eyed and happy to be on familiar ground once more.

Exhilarated by the thought that they were going home, the three pounded out the mile to the border of the Strip as dusk was falling. Alert riders loped out of the gloom, presenting carbines, before they were across the line, and Jack Doone mechanically dropped hand to gun.

"Tryin' to slip over, eh?" barked the cavalry sergeant heading the patrol.

"We ain't sooners, soldier!" Jack retorted. "The oldster here is Adam Calder, owner of the Swallowfork, only ranch left in the Strip. If our say-so's not enough, we can fetch the sheriff to identify us."

"Wouldn't do any good, cowboy!" replied the Fort Sill trooper. "Orders is strict not to let anyone past the line till after noon tomorrow. Then you can go where you please."

Back toward Moccasin Springs rode the Calders and Doone, much disappointed. The overcrowded town held no allurements for them, and they camped outside. Jack ventured in for

provisions to tide them over two meals, and came back reporting that among all the restless throng he hadn't seen one familiar face.

But shortly after sunrise an old acquaintance, making his rounds as special deputy, caught sight of them at their breakfast fire and dropped from his saddle, shaking hands all around.

"Happen to see my foreman, Barbazon, in yonder?" Calder asked abruptly.

"Why, no," replied the special deputy. "Fact is, he ain't been in for some time. Bronc stomped him, accordin' to Red Slade, who's been actin' for Barb."

"Slade!" Calder lunged to his feet, face convulsed with fury. "That murderin' renegade on my ranch? We reckoned him dead!"

Doone sat immovable, eyes smoldering. Julia exclaimed unbelievingly.

The special deputy looked flustered. "What's wrong?"

"I'll tell you!" Calder resumed his seat and spun a tale which left the deputy sheriff sag-jawed.

The visitor found his voice. "He's tryin' to jump your ranch, looks like. Remember Flash Morey? Well, him and two other Slade men are at the jail, locked up for drunken brawlin' yesterday."

"We'll go there," Calder rose up and gathered in his saddle, Jack and Julia following suit. "Want to see Andy Simcoe, anyways."

"Simcoe's dead, and his first deputy. Drygulched some mysterious last December," informed the special deputy. "Nate Higgins is sheriff now."

The boomer outfits had been on the move toward the Shawnee Strip since before dawn; and, the town having disgorged most of its surplus population, the Calders and Jack Doone made fast time to the calaboose.

A light wagon, with white tilt, and two rangy horses on the pole, stood hitched to the rack. All dismounting, Doone led the way inside, and a stocky young man, the sheriff's star prominent on his vest, got out of a swivel chair, smiling.

"You're the Calders and Jack Doone, ain'tcha? Your straw boss, Slade—"

"Straw boss, hell!" Jack took the words out of Adam Calder's mouth. "Where's Flash Morey? Heard you had him locked up."

"Yeah, him and two pards," replied Sheriff Higgins, who hailed from the other side of the county. "Turned 'em loose a half hour ago. They'd sobered up."

"Sit again, Sheriff," Jack requested, jerking forward a chair for Julia. "How long's Slade been at Swallowfork?"

When the young sheriff told him, Jack glanced at Julia. "No wonder Barbazon never wrote—maybe Slade's killed him and signed all those telegrams with Tim's name."

"He did . . . operator mentioned it to me one day," interposed the sheriff; "but Slade said he had authority from your foreman, who was laid up and didn't want to worry you."

Jack and Calder swore softly, and the former briefly related the facts. "Those damn renegades have taken possession of Swallowfork," he wound up, "and they'll make a big fight. Will you get a posse and go with us?"

"Sure," Higgins nodded quickly, "but it'll take a while to round up my scattered deputies. You want to go in at the tail of the run? It starts at noon."

"Sooner the better!" pronounced Calder. "Jack didn't tell you we hooked up Slade to that fat coyote, Shindler. While we were at Muscatine, my daughter wrote the agent at Big Rock, New Mexico, to tell him why we hadn't showed up with the cattle. He replied that his name wasn't Shindler and he never bought any stock off us."

"If you folks want to ride on down to the line," said Sheriff Higgins, rising, "I'll meet you there soon as I can."

He accompanied them to the door, Jack remarking as they walked over to the horses, "Hombre who owns this wagon better get movin' if he wants to make the run."

"He's past wantin' anything," Higgins answered. "Got drunk, fell off the seat and his wagon run over him. If you folks'll take the outfit off my hands, I'll be obliged."

"Glad to." Calder ran a practiced eye over vehicle and team. "We lost one wagon in the storm and the other it was cheaper to sell than ship. I'll drive and leave my saddle horse in town."

V

Homestead Trail

THOUGH the Calders and Doone failed to catch sight of the former ramrod of the Two Anchor, Flash Morey was spying on them from the shadow of the feed barn doorway as they left town. In broad daylight and in the open, with so many to witness his actions, Flash dared not attempt his dry-gulching tactics. And, unable to get by the soldiers to warn Slade, he adopted the only course left to him. After whispered words with his companions, all three emerged from the barn and flung into saddles, turning south.

Covering that short mile from Moccasin Springs without knowing they were discreetly tailed, Jack and the Calders took their place in the vast throng lining the northern border of the Strip, and a long wait began. Cavalrymen, with carbines on knees, faced the wildly excited thousands across the boundary line, holding all in check until noon. People in wagons, on horseback, some on foot with push-carts. Many were slated to fall hopelessly behind in the trampling rush, but all at that moment wore expressions of eagerness and hope.

Adam Calder was able to wedge his wagon, hitched to the lively team, close to the front rank. Jack and Julia had their eyes on the road from Moccasin Springs, watching for the sheriff's dust. It failed to appear.

The uproar of three to four thousand people, talking and shouting along a solid line that was like a battle-front, increased as the cavalry commander peered nervously at the watch in his hand, put his other hand to pistol butt and slowly drew it from the sheath. Five minutes more. . . .

"When it starts, we'll have to go along or get knocked down, Adam!" Jack shouted to Calder. "No sign of Higgins, but he'll catch up, I reckon. All set, Julia?"

She nodded, her lips tense.

The troop leader's gun banged, and the echo was caught up by crashing carbines. The cavalry mounts wheeled frantically to get out of the way of the sudden stampede of wagon teams, horsemen and cart-pushing pedestrians. Household goods began strewing the earth at the first rush. Jack and Julia spurred off beside the wagon, Adam yelling as he gave his horses head.

To the younger cowman and the girl it seemed they were traveling in an inferno of dust and heat, with roaring wheels and poundings hoofs all around them. Half the time they couldn't even see the homesteaders who were racing with them toward the goal of promised land. There were screams and curses out of the fog, sounds of collision, while the earth trembled. The race got into Jack and Julia's blood, they forgot everything but reaching Swallowfork range, where the spring grass would be rippling in the soft wind. . . .

Flash Morey at that moment, was nearer than they would have believed. Crowded in a covered wagon, whose driver they had compelled to take them aboard, Flash and his gun pals were cruising on the trail of the Calders and Doone. The tailing outfit barged out of the haze and came on like hell awheel. Rougher country had opened up beneath driving hoofs, just as Julia Calder sang out:

"Behind you, Jack!"

Doone's big body screwed in saddle leather, one hand whipping to thigh-

tied gun. He flicked it out, doubting the evidence of his eyes; for, though the driver of the nearing team hadn't a familiar face, there crouched behind him a lanky figure, which loosed all the venom in Jack's being. Flash Morey!

"Pull left, Adam!" bawled Doone, in a last effort to forestall collision.

Calder tugged the lines of his ground-devouring horses in blind response. It was no use! Jack's gun barked. A shot from Morey's Colt crossed Jack's shoulder. Then, front wheel grazing rear wheel, the two wagons ground together. It happened on the lip of a gully, and Calder's team lifted forefeet on thin air, plunged over, whinnying shrilly. The ranch wagon followed jerkily, landing with a crash in the gully bottom, which, fortunately, was a drop of not over ten feet.

Jack's gun spat again as the strange driver jammed the brake, halting hazardously near the jump-off. Then Jack, with Julia beside him, was charging down to Calder in the gully, both insensible to the chances of breaking their necks or the legs of their broncs. They made a safe landing, and Doone slid from saddle, choking the reins. A sweeping glance showed him that, though the wagon had overturned, Calder was crawling free of the wreck.

"Slade's gang!" Jack hollered, half of the opinion that Flash had somewhere joined up with Red and another wagon load of killers would presently thunder through the dust-fog. "We'll have to stand and fight, Adam."

As much to keep Julia out of it as for any other reason, Jack grabbed her, boosted her to the back of her horse. "Ride south, circle north and find that posse!"

She was away down the gully, swallowed in an instant by billowing dust, while the guns of the outlaws ripped holes in the aim-diverting haze. Of a sudden the lead-throwing switched to Jack and Calder, though Flash, knowing nothing about the expected sheriff's posse, was puzzled that the girl should ride off.

Jack seized Calder and swung him against the steep side of the gully, on his knees. The hats of both skimmed off as slugs ranged downward. Then Jack husked:

"Target 'em when they look over!"

Calder nodded, glanced up. Cautious heads projected beyond the gully's rim, preceded by gun arms angled to stream lead at the kneeling men. Jack and Calder's upraised six-shooters vomited smoky flame. With a stricken yell a body cartwheeled over the embankment, narrowly missing them in its descent. It sprawled a yard from the wrecked wagon and Jack stabbed a look that way, announced in gratified tone:

"Flash Morey—one down!"

A pregnant silence fell, cut through by the dwindling thunder of the stampeding homesteaders. Ten minutes of this and Jack's patience was worn razor thin. Apparently he had been wrong in believing that Slade himself was near at hand to support Morey. If just two gunmen were left, he was heading for level ground where he could shoot at them. But, as he was moving for the gully's outlet, hoofbeats neared, coming from the north. He heard sharp exclamations above him, then the distant crack of a Winchester. A man staggered backward to the gully rim, rolled down to lie beside Flash.

"Must be the posse!" Jack cried, and with Calder treading his heels, scrambled upward.

A glance showed one of Flash's gunmen dead. A look to the north revealed Sheriff Higgins and Julia riding neck and neck, in the officer's hand a smoking carbine. Behind them spurred other riders. Jack whooped, turning his gaze on the wagon which had collided with Calder's. The third gunman was thrusting aside a farmerish figure in overalls, in an attempt to reach the driver's seat. The gunnie whirled at Jack's shout, shooting from the hip. He went down slackly as

Doone's lead found him and the homesteader raised hands aloft, crying:

"Don't toss none at me, cowboy! They forced me to tote 'em, and I'm behind in the race!"

Doone didn't doubt this was the truth, and gestured for the farmer to drive on. Calder was running to meet the posse, and the sheriff's words carried to Jack:

"We're late, but I had a job gettin' fifteen boys together. You ready to go on?"

Calder rode one of the wagon teams bareback as the posse got into fast motion southward, passing the belated homesteader flogging his horses to a hard gallop. Except for the hammering of the sheriff's party, a singular quietness lay over the vast territory after the turmoil. The dust was settling. Here and there as they fared south at wracking pace, knots of people appeared on land where they had driven stakes.

Up out of the rolling grassland, they rode at last into sight of the barbed wire strung around Swallowfork range. The ranch house and outbuildings were in full view, with men going to and fro. When the horsebackers whirled through the gate on the run, Slade's renegades had their first warning of imminent disaster. Gun-smoke spilled in the air as the distant figures raced for the ranch house, shouting to one another.

Doone, Calder and the sheriff led the charge, but concentrated gun-fire from the house, as the outlaws forted up, stalled the horsemen midway. They retired over hummocky ground and dismounted, turning the horses into a willow-fringed swale where lead couldn't touch them.

While the sun was westering, the long-range duel continued, until Jack, speaking abruptly to Calder and Higgins, dropped on hands and knees and crawled along in the direction of the swale.

Julia, sitting in the grass back of the firing line, crept after him, calling, "Some crazy thing you're up to, I know! Tell a fellow."

He looked at her, a smile breaking across his determined features. "Quickest way to settle this is the best way. Watch my smoke!"

He was busy for twenty minutes slipping the gear from the horses, well hidden from curious eyes at the ranch house. At the end of that time a whirlwind of horseflesh tore out and across the level, nineteen riderless horses racing in seeming aimless fashion toward the Calder dwelling, where hostile eyes and ready guns peered from every window. All riderless, those horses, except one. And yet it was an eye-testing job to discern that single rider flattened on the back of a roan gelding. Even Julia, looking anxiously for him, thought at first that he had stayed behind.

Then she exclaimed suddenly, grasping her father's arm, "I see him! On the roan, between the pinto and the grulla. He'll get there. . . ."

The rest died on her lips, as the horses began to break mass formation, a hundred yards from the house. Jack couldn't bunch them up without disclosing his position and drawing the outlaw's fire. He must trust to luck and his mount's speed to gain a corner of the house before he was spied.

Slade's gang were wondering why all those horses had been sent charging toward the house. They hadn't seen Doone leave the firing line, because of screening brush and ground swells. Their guns remained quiet as puzzlement held sway. Jack had counted on their refraining from killing valuable horses, so long as they were in doubt it could serve any good purpose.

The house loomed rapidly nearer, every foot of ground covered increasing the danger of premature discovery of Jack's figure welded to the roan's body on the offside. Behind him the posse was moving in slowly, the outlaws not at once noticing them. At the house corner, just beyond the

porch, Jack dropped off, spilled to his knees; then lunged up in a desperate dodging motion, as a horse on the roan's tail nearly ran him down.

Next moment he was beneath a side window, and he crouched there, his hatless head below the sill, getting his breath. The voice of Fats Shindler, fake Indian agent, spoke in the window opening above and for a second he thought he had been observed to dismount. But the words were reassuring:

"Damned if I savvy that move, Red!"

"Hey, that posse's walkin' us down!" someone else yelled, and firing broke out.

Jack stood up, gripped the sill and chinned himself, to glance into the living-room. Not above half a dozen men were there, all with backs turned while they fired out of the opposite window. Jack got a fresh clutch on the sill, hoisted his body into the open window almost without sound. One leg was in the room, he was bending forward to clear the raised sash, guns in hand, when a head turned. The astonished eyes of Red Slade found him.

"Doone! Just in time to rack your chips!" the boss rustler roared, leaping sidewise, his gun coming up, as Doone drew his other leg inside and fell to a crouch against the wall.

Because of Doone's quick lunge and drop, Red's slugs chipped the window-sill. Jack let drive; Red swayed, pounded out his answer with a single gun, for one of Jack's bullets had smashed his left arm. Jack was conscious of lead flicking his shoulder. His next shots swung Slade off balance; he crashed to the floor. Steadily he cursed Doone, the sound fading to a whisper, ending with a twist of lips that could make no sound.

Only Fats Shindler had turned in the smoke-hung room away from the windows. The other four were still firing at the posse. The return firing of the posse was closer, soon they would hit the porch—but Doone was fighting to be upright in boot leather when they entered. Fats Shindler smiled his last and shook the house falling as Jack bored the obese body through above its bulging waistline. Doone was stumbling through the smoke, keeping a shoulder to the wall, for there was danger of his stepping into a bullet fired by his friends, the closer they advanced. He was making for the door into the hall and gained it just as he emptied his guns.

He bent double and bounced out of the room. But not a shot followed him, for Calder and Sheriff Higgins were lunging through the front door, trailed by eager fighting men, and the last rustler was backed in a corner, hugging his ears.

Down the gloomy hallway, Jack had fallen over two bound figures and he was sawing energetically with a pocket-knife when Calder stuck his head through the connecting door:

"Jack! Any more of 'em?"

"Cleaned up, Adam!" Jack chuckled. "But here's Tim Barbazon and Wong, with tales of woe. Tim's afraid you thought he turned traitor."

"Hell, no!" Calder advanced, hand outstretched.

The light step of Julia on the porch reached Jack's ears, and he hurried forth, his spread arms warning her away from the interior.

"You don't want to go in there yet a while, honey. Let's walk a bit."

Under the willows beside the bunkhouse they finally paused. Julia was urging:

"Promise you'll buy into the Swallowfork, as Dad offered. It'll be the same as running a brand of your own, even better."

"He'll have to take me as a son-in-law, as well as a ranch partner," Jack drew her to him with possessive sweep of the arm. "Isn't that so, Julia?"

"Please," she murmured, "allow me a little breath, tall man."

"Why?" His lips hovered over hers.

"So—so that I can say 'yes.'" Her eyes were deep pools of lovelight as their lips met.

Cowboy in a Hurry

By Lucretia Whitehead Payne

Hasty Tyler was in a rush about everything—about filing on a homestead, about tricking a range hog, and about falling in love with Lois.

HASTY TYLER slapped the mail sack for the O P L outfit across the cantle of his saddle, hung packages lashed together by stout cords on either side of the horn, and made ready to step up on his restive black horse.

"Fire out your way, Hasty? Or just in a hurry?"

Hasty jerked his red head, adorned by a battered gray Stetson, in the direction of the bald-headed county surveyor who had sauntered toward him, and grinned. This grin brought into view white, even teeth which appeared almost dazzling in the sunburned face. The cowboy laughed:

"Sure, there's always a fire anywhere I'm at, Nate. And everyone's anxious to go to a fire. . . . Come and see me some time, won't you?"

Then he was lifting the reins from the black's neck, and there was just another dust ribbon along the main street of Cowhide as H. S. Tyler—"Hasty" for short and for appropriateness—left the town behind him. He grinned again as he thought of his reputation for always being in a hurry, and felt a thrill of gratification that he could move so fast. Most cowmen, regardless of age, moved as deliberately as the cattle they herded. Hasty grew irritable when things happened to curb his customary dashing from one thing to another.

"Wonder how much longer I can stand the old man's stepson?" Hasty asked of Chico, his black horse, which was loping swiftly along the road that

skirted the valley of Moss Creek, although road and creek were hidden from each other by thickly growing alders that followed the stream. "Seems I'll just boil over some day and let that uppity cuss and his cactus-faced foreman, Blink Binns, know what I think of 'em. Wonder why I'm in such a yank to get back to the O P L when I get as pleasant a welcome there as a yellow dog!"

Hasty's speech sounded much more savage than the animated expression on his blond, sunburned face, and immediately his mouth puckered to whistle. Despite sundry clashes with Sam Meade and his big, brutal foreman, Blink Binns, life was still a grand, sweet song to Hasty.

"Move along, Chico," he addressed his mount again. "Shake a hoof, hoss. Gettin' close to dinner time, and I'm about as empty as Mother Hubbard's cupboard."

The cowboy ran his spurs exploringly along Chico's flanks, and one second later he was trying to get his balance on a black tornado which pitched and dipped and whirled and stood straight up on his hind feet. Caught off guard, Hasty could not regain his balance and soon found himself sitting in the dust while Chico finished the fireworks unhampered.

"Gosh!" ejaculated Hasty, his gaze diverted from his fiery horse to the scattered contents of the mail sack and the packages strewn helter-skelter over the ground. "Won't Sam Meade be frothin' if I've lost any of the precious mail? Or any of that stuff for makin's and things he ordered from town?"

Chico, having satisfactorily expressed his disapproval of his owner's recent insult, now settled down to graze quietly beside the road some hundred feet farther along, so Hasty got to his feet and began to gather up the scattered mail. But exactly as if fate, this morning, was bunching up everything against Mr. H. S. Tyler, there came a sudden gust of wind to pick up some smaller articles and carry them high in the air.

Hasty swore softly but feelingly as several envelopes sailed over the tops of the alders and disappeared. What if they had landed in Moss Creek? Unless it was so bad it never should have been written, no letter was improved by a bath.

Hasty removed his spurs and wormed his way through the closely growing trees, grunting, puffing with his efforts.

The cowboy had finally penetrated the barrier when he stopped short, rubbed his eyes, shut them, and opened them again. Not twenty feet away was standing a girl! An adorable girl with curly brown hair escaping from under a torn old hat, and, in a sun-kissed face, brown eyes danced with unspoken amusement. In one small, tanned hand she held the errant letters; the other rested on the handle of a shovel.

Hasty liked girls in general, and flattered himself he knew all there were in this part of the country. But he had never before seen this delectable five-foot-four goddess. She was as much a goddess as Venus, too, even if she did wear a loose, dark shirt and overalls tucked into high boots.

"Looks like she's trying to dig a ditch," thought Hasty, while he tugged off his own battered hat and remarked gayly, "I'm runnin' down some strays what got out of the mail bag when my horse unloaded me a few minutes ago."

The amusement in the girl's dark eyes repeated itself in her clear, sweet voice. "At first I believed these had floated down from Heaven for me," she returned. "But since they're addressed to someone who isn't me, they are evidently from your mail sack."

Hasty advanced to take the proffered envelopes, his blue eyes drinking in the magic of that bright face which smiled and dimpled so charmingly. She wasn't exactly a country girl, nor was she a tenderfoot either, and she didn't appear to be one bit flustered to be found in work clothes, holding a big shovel.

"Thank you, ma'am," the cowboy found speech at last. "I'm lucky that the wind carried those letters thisaway, over the alders. But fust off, I thought sure I was headin' for all sorts of trouble when they began to take a dance in the sky. . . . How long you been here, ma'am? I'm Hasty Tyler from the O P L outfit, where I act like a cowpuncher when I ain't tearin' 'round somewheres, bustin' broncs or gettin' mail and bringin' back supplies."

"My uncle's just taken up a homestead here in Moss Creek Valley," answered the girl, and Hasty felt he was already thrilling to every cadence of that clear, sweet voice. "We've been living down in the southern part of the State, but Aunt Meg died last winter and Uncle Ad couldn't stand summer there without her. So we just struck out for new country and landed here. Uncle Ad is Mr. Addison Tunnell, and I'm Lois Tunnell."

"It's sure a wonderful place to land in," enthused Hasty, quite sure that right here was almost as good as Heaven since Miss Lois Tunnell had come here to live. "You taken all this valley?"

It had suddenly occurred to the cowboy that old Roger Baker, the retired owner of the O P L, had planned to get hold of this land. In fact, Hasty had heard the "old man," before he left last winter, specifically instruct Sam Meade, his stepson to whom he had sold the outfit on time payments, to see about this very thing. It was valuable to the O P L for range, and would old Roger blow off the lid when he learned the indolent, inefficient Sam had slipped up on it!

"Only the lower quarter section. The upper quarter section goes into the canyon where uncle thought it would be hard to raise any hay. We plan to run some cattle, you see."

The girl was all eager anticipation over her uncle's plans for the new home, and her soft cheeks glowed with the rich color of ardent youth.

While Hasty's blue eyes missed none of her eager charm, his pulses quickened at a thought which flashed to his mind. As soon as Sam Meade learned the lower quarter section had been taken, he'd file quicker'n scat on the land up in the canyon, where Moss Creek had its source in large springs. Whoever gained title to land where the springs were located, would control the water. Therefore, if Sam Meade was as nasty as he usually was, he'd shut off the Tunnell's water supply entirely. They should have been told about this at the land office, and Hasty, realizing they had not, felt his temper rise.

Then another, more agreeable thought superseded this first one, and the cowboy blessed Chico for having unloaded him just beyond those alders!

A swoop, and Hasty possessed himself of one of the girl's hands. A moment he held it hard, gazing deep into two lovely brown eyes. "So long!" he blurted at last, wishing he dared kiss those soft red lips. "Be seein' you again," and he was plunging through the trees toward the road.

Having again slapped mail sack and packages across his saddle, in another moment Hasty was sending Chico pell-mell on an unplanned-for return trip to Cowhide, where he brought his winded pony to a skidding halt in front of a dingy brick building. Up the stairway to the second floor raced the cowboy, three steps at a time, and burst into a disorderly room where a shifty-eyed old fellow was eating a meager lunch.

Hasty was in even more of a hurry than usual, and it would take too long to have the county surveyor go out and run the lines for him on the quarter section above the land Addison Tunnell had homesteaded. He had remembered that old Ezry Pelly "located" settlers, for a sizable fee, and it would take only the amount of the fee to get the description of that quarter section from him.

"Gosh all hemlock, Hasty Tyler!" ex-

ploded Ezry, almost choking on a piece of bread, his furtive, pale eyes widening with alarm. "You might as well scare a feller to death, bustin' in like you was the fire department! What kin I do fer you?"

FIFTEEN minutes later Ezry Pelly had pocketed all of Hasty's money, and the cowboy had visited the land office where he had filed on land he had every reason to believe lay directly above the Tunnell quarter section on Moss Creek.

"Located the Tunnells, too, did the old buzzard?" commented Hasty to himself as he rushed from the land office to his waiting horse. Ezry had let this slip when he had remarked slyly upon taking Hasty's twenty-five dollars, "You'll be havin' fine neighbors out to your claim, Hasty. Ad Tunnell was sure lucky to get me to locate him, too."

The cowboy swung to Chico's back, sputtering, "Ezry must be linin' his pockets good these days. Wisht the Tunnells and me had been able to get along without him."

When Hasty reached the O P L ranch, Sam Meade's smug face was not among those which glowered or smiled in relief at his appearance. Blink Binns, who was habitually disagreeable, took the packages and mail, remarking with customary sourness:

"If you kin persuade the cook to give you a cold snack, all righty, Hasty. . . . However come you're called that? Hasty, bah! Thar ain't nothin' slower'n you 'cept a turtle, what ain't native to this country. If you kin manage," with heavy sarcasm, "to do some work for your pay this afternoon, Sam wants some of the three-year-olds broke."

Hasty swallowed an angry retort. He aimed to see his new-found goddess this evening, and he wanted to go without the bruises sure to follow a tangle with Blink. But some day he'd let Sam Meade's ugly foreman know H. S. Tyler was to be reckoned with—and how!

That evening Hasty gulped his supper, and asked Sam, who had put in his appearance, and had been smiling to himself in a most unusual manner, for the loan of a team and wagon.

"Takin' to night work?" queried Sam with the superior air he had adopted as soon as he became boss in his stepfather's place—an air which never failed to make Hasty's blood boil and raise the hair on the back of his neck. "Glad to know you're aimin' to make up for the time you fooled away today. Blink says 'twas after dinner when you got back from town. . . . All right, so long as you don't tire the team."

Rattling down the road, Hasty grinned at thought of the work he'd do tonight. About eight o'clock, with a load of logs he had got on his way, he was pulling past Ad Tunnell's homestead when he saw Sam Meade's light buggy and team of bays in front of the small edifice in which the newcomers were temporarily living. Could the boss be calling on the Tunnells? The very thought gave Hasty a strange, hollow sensation. Halting his team, Hasty sped to the cabin where his worst fears were confirmed.

It was indeed Sam Meade, whose black eyes were set too close to his big nose, and he greeted Hasty with surprise: "What you doin' here, cowboy?"

Just then, with the appearance of the most beautiful vision Hasty ever hoped to see, the world seemed wonderfully iluminated. Lois Tunnell, in a gay yellow frock, looked like some lovely spring flower. Her brown eyes danced, and her sweet voice was friendly as she cried:

"Hello, Hasty. I didn't know I'd see you again so soon."

"I'm getting logs to build a shack on my homestead, Miss Lois," answered Hasty, ignoring Sam Meade. "I went back to town and filed on the quarter

section above you and now I hope you'll help me plan where'd be the best place to put my new house."

The girl's face expressed her delight, but Sam Meade glowered darkly.

"So," he broke out wrathfully, "you file on homesteads on my time! You borrow my team to put improvements on your property! Miss Tunnell," turning abruptly toward the girl, "do you know what this double-crossin' cowboy's done? He's taken this land above you so he'll control the water needed for your uncle's claim. He's prob'ly goin' to soak you good and plenty for the water you'll have to use."

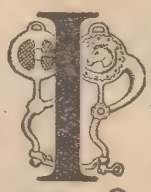
All the friendliness faded from Lois Tunnell's brown eyes; her face became bleak and cold. Why hadn't she guessed? Evidently Hasty hadn't had the least idea of taking this land until he'd learned today that her uncle had settled in the valley. And he had seemed so honest and gay and impetuous that she'd been looking forward to seeing him again. But not as a thief, planning to monopolize water her uncle must have to raise a hay crop.

Looking right through the expostulating cowboy, the girl said, "I'm glad we learned about it in time, Mr. Meade. Perhaps you can show us some way by which we can get rights to the water."

The boss of the O P L put his hand on the girl's arm. "I'll see what can be done tonight while we're in town for the dance. We must be goin' if we expect to get there for all the fun. As for you, cowboy, you're fired! Get your stuff off the O P L tonight and I'll give you your time tomorrow."

Too furious to defend himself before the girl, since he knew Sam Meade would twist everything he could say so it damned him more, Hasty watched Sam tenderly help Lois into the buggy and drive away behind the swift team.

"Sometimes you get goin' so fast you miss things you ought to notice, fellow," Hasty scolded himself in disgust. "Why didn't you remember there was a dance tonight, and ask Lois? Then Sam wouldn't have been here. He must have been here earlier too, and he didn't let grass grow under his feet, either."



IT WAS just daybreak when Hasty Tyler made his trip from the O P L with his war sack, his gun, his fishing tackle and his bed all packed on his fiery black pony. Once again he found himself near the cabin on the Tunnell homestead, and when he saw Sam Meade bringing Lois home from Cowhide something prompted the cowboy to lead Chico around behind the shack.

Sam was laughing rather boisterously for Sam Meade, as he usually permitted himself only a thin-lipped smile, and Hasty thought, "I don't trust that walloper if he's got a few drinks too many. For he can act mighty nasty."

When the rig halted, the cowboy was close enough to hear Sam's words, in rather a thick voice, "—and I like you so much already, girlie, that I'd agree to 'most anything you might ask if you'll just do what I asked you to do."

Lois Tunnell was shrinking away from the man, her sweet face white, her eyes wide with apprehension. Suddenly she raised one small brown hand and brought it down on her companion's cheek with a sharp smack which brought a smile to Hasty's grim lips.

"I told you in town I won't do what you asked!" she cried. "If I'd known anyone else in Cowhide well enough to ask to bring me home I'd never have come with you. Now, go! I never want to see you again."

"Hold on!" rasped Sam, holding her fast while he tried to bend his mouth to hers. "Your uncle ain't up yet, so what say we—"

"But *I'm* up!" spoke up Hasty Tyler close to his late employer's elbow. "Let Miss Tunnell alone, you skunk. And before you go I'll show you *why* you better not come back here again."

Seizing this chance, Lois slid from the rig, and disappeared in the log

cabin. Sam, wrapping the lines around the brake, grasped the long whip which he thought made his outfit look more "classy," and made a flying jump, which, had it terminated as he planned, would have brought Hasty to the ground.

Swiftly side-stepping, Hasty snatched the whip from his antagonist's hand, and threw it as far away as he could. Then he waited for Sam to recover his balance.

"You need horse-whipping, all right," the cowboy said. "But I been honin' for a long time to give you with my bare hands the licking you deserve. Now come and get it."

Approximately ten minutes later, watching the much battered and furiously angry Sam Meade drive away, Hasty dusted himself off and glanced toward the cottage. Surely now Lois would come and speak to him, and he could tell her the truth about his taking up the claim. But she did not appear. Maybe, thought Hasty, her uncle wouldn't let her—or, maybe she just didn't want to. So the cowboy went on to his new home wondering how he might make himself right in her eyes.

The best thing would be to make a separate ditch, he decided. This he'd turn over to the uncle and niece so they could have water without tapping his ditch. Up on the higher land which flanked the little valley on the side farther from the creek—land above irrigation possibilities and covered with sage-brush and cactus—Hasty made a rough survey.

Suddenly he noticed a stone half-covered with sage-brush roots, a marker for a section corner. He looked closer to read the figures and felt a little chill go down his spine. He recalled the description of his claim which he had gotten from Ezry Pelly, and said under his breath:

"If this stone's in the right place —and it must be, for it's been here a long time— I've filed on this worthless land up here, a quarter of a mile from Moss Creek! I've sure been played for a sucker!"

Hungry as he was, Hasty forgot all about breakfast. Rushing back to where he had left Chico picketed, he was soon mounted and bound pell-mell for Cowhide. Deep in thoughts of what had happened in the few hours since he had first seen Lois Tunnell, the cowboy realized she had given him a purpose which had been lacking all these twenty-three helter-skelter years of his young life.

Upon arriving in town and after futile rattlings of the door of the land office, he complained disgustedly, "Some people think a day don't begin till it's half-gone. I'll get Nate out of bed so he can help me," and two minutes later he was knocking loudly at the door of the county surveyor's home.

"It's worse'n a fire this time, Nate," concluded Hasty after relating the reason for his urgency, "if things are as hay-wire as I got a hunch they are— Where are your maps and plats?"

But study of the surveyor's maps definitely increased the cowboy's fears. Nate Alcott shared those fears, too, though he remarked gruffly, in order to conceal his real sympathy:

"I'm sorry as hell if you've got stung, Hasty. But you really got it comin' to you for bein' in such a damn hurry all-a-time. If you'd come to me, 'stead of dealin' with that slinkin' Ezry Pelly. . . . Let's go over to the land office. Bert's there by now, and we can check my plats with his. Also look at the records."

Hasty almost dragged Nate off of his feet on the way to the land office, where, not long after, they found by the records that not only had Hasty filed on barren, sage-brush and cactus land a half-mile north of the valley, but Addison Tunnell had done the same! In Hasty's mind stood out clearly three unpleasant facts: He was jobless, and the only home he might call his own was a barren hill; the girl he was falling in love with and her uncle

were also possessed of useless land; and to cap it all, Lois had misunderstood him, was angry with him.

In despair, Hasty was about to push away the plats, when something else caught his eye. "Here!" he exclaimed, pointing to one map which at first he regarded almost casually. "Is this the plat of the township where the O P L's located? It's up to date?"

When the land office clerk nodded, the cowboy spoke excitedly to the old surveyor, "You see what I see there, Nate?"

Nate's bald head glowed pink with excitement. "I sure do! But, heck! You and Addison Tunnell have used your rights to file on homestead land."

"Yes, but the girl hasn't!"

"Huh?" ejaculated the surveyor blankly. Then the light of understanding brightened his rugged face. "I savvy what you have in mind. For once in your life, I'm urgin' you to hurry, Hasty!"

But for once the cowboy left a place slowly, pondering his problem. Behind the corner of the building he stopped to light a cigaret, and at a sudden sound held the match unlighted. Two men had halted around the corner on the other side, speaking with cautiously lowered voices. Voices which Hasty instantly recognized!

"Ain't it lucky Ezry Pelly hunted me up last night, while I was in town for the dance? Drat that girl! To act like she's too good for me! The old skinflint sold his information high."

"Trust that old buzzard for that," gritted a second voice, that of Blink Binns. "Two hundred bucks! He shore had his nerve. But mebbe what he told you's worth it."

"Yeah," agreed Sam Meade. "Might as well tell you, Blink, me and Ezry was in cahoots though. So I never was scairt he'd let anybody file on the valley-land 'long Moss Creek if he could help it. Now, thanks to him I got the Tunnells, also Hasty Tyler, right where I can crack the whip."

"You're sure a smart one, boss," answered Blink admiringly. "Now the gal and her uncle'll be feedin' right outa your hand."

Hasty started. What nasty scheme did Sam Meade have on foot? The cowboy's fingers itched to seize his late boss. Prickles of wrath chased up over his scalp. But he couldn't tackle both fellows, and if Lois would consent to file, as he planned, it would hurt Sam worse than any physical beating.

Sam was speaking again. "Miss Lois Tunnell will be mighty glad to come to me *now*, on my terms, when I tell her I'll throw her uncle and her off 'less she does like I suggested last night."

Blink Binns added, "Hasty's done for too, since I'll have what he thinks is *his* claim, while you have the old man's. . . . Well, I reckon we can get the business tended to now. The land office is open. Lemme see—"

The rest was lost on the cowboy as he slipped quickly inside a near-by door and immediately thereafter left the building by the alley.

LEGALLY, Hasty could do nothing to stop Sam Meade and Blink Binns from filing on the claims on Moss Creek, the land which Hasty had believed his and Addison Tunnell's until he had seen proof this was not so. Both he and Tunnell had now exercised their homestead rights, even if they had drawn only blanks. To get those rights restored would take time—a great deal of time. And time was not to be wasted.

But Hasty had another arrow in his quiver; one which, as he galloped swiftly back to the valley of Moss Creek, he fervently hoped Sam Meade knew nothing about. At the door of the log shack, which for the cowboy sheltered the most precious thing on earth, he swung from Chico's back and knocked.

There was no reply. But in the dis-

tance Hasty could see Ad Tunnell using a grubbing-hoe on a small patch of sage brush which had taken root in the valley, and he believed Lois must be at home. Dashing out to the shed which served as temporary stable, he saddled the girl's pony and with it returned to the dwelling.

A minute later Hasty entered the cabin, and in the middle of the room saw Lois, looking as adorable as ever. But now her bright brown eyes flashed with anger; vexation caused the brilliant color in her soft cheeks.

"Miss Lois," began the cowboy earnestly, disregarding both her anger and her confusion, "you'll probably not believe me when I tell you that what I came here to get you to do is 'cause I love you. I never did think I'd catch the love germ so hasty. You must go to town with me right away. You, and only you, can save you and your uncle from bein' thrown off this homestead. I'll tell you all about it on the way to town."

"Indeed I'll go nowhere with you!" flashed Lois, exactly as Hasty had feared she would do. "After the way you grabbed the land that controls the water for Uncle's place—I don't believe you plan to do us any good."

Quietly but determinedly the cowboy stooped, and, before Lois guessed his purpose, gathered the girl into his arms. Without a word he carried her outside. How Hasty wished he could hold her thus forever, this girl who meant the world and all to him! She kicked and would have screamed, but Hasty held his hand over her mouth.

Placing her firmly but gently in the saddle on her pony's back, and holding both the girl and the horse, Hasty at last began to talk.

"That's where you're all wrong. We're all wrong. I don't control the water for this quarter section; nor this land don't belong to your uncle. That skunk who located you and your uncle —I went to him, too, and he stung me 'zactly the same as he did you—got us to file on worthless land north of this valley. What's more, Sam Meade paid Ezry Pelly two hundred bucks for this information, and now Sam and his brute of a foreman are plannin' to file on this meadow-land we thought was ours."

Lois Tunnell's eyes were wide with apprehension. "If that's true, what can I do?"

"You've never used your homestead rights, have you?"

"Oh!" with a world of relief in the one small word. "Of course not! So I can go and file on this land in Uncle's stead?"

"Well, maybe not exactly, but something like that. Let's go!" and Hasty vaulted to the saddle on Chico.

As the two loped swiftly along the road to Cowhide, the cowboy talked eloquently of the glorious mountain country, of the cattle industry, watching expressions which crossed his companion's face like summer clouds softening a summer sky. All the while he hoped that his plan might not miscarry, and that the checkmate he foresaw for Sam Meade might go through.

Finally Lois looked him full in the eyes, her own eyes questioning him, as well as her query: "What do you want from me for your help, Hasty, if I can file on a homestead? You're not going to act like Sam Meade, are you?"

Hasty shook his head earnestly, his blue eyes luminous with his love for the girl who rode with him. "Only thing I ask is a chance to see you once in a while and try to make you believe in me and maybe like me something like I do you."

"That might be arranged," was the quiet reply, but in so cool a tone that Hasty, watching the road and his galloping pony, did not notice the warm flush which belied the words.

At the edge of town, Hasty caught sight of Sam Meade and his foreman walking along the main street, and therefore took another route to reach their destination.

"Bert," said the cowboy as he es-

corted Lois Tunnell into the land office at Cowhide, "Miss Tunnell wants to file on a homestead. Let's see that last plat I was lookin' at with Nate Alcott. . . . Yes, here's the hundred and sixty. Mighty fine land too. Howcome it's been overlooked all these years?"

With elaborate carelessness, reading the meaning of the broad wink the cowboy gave him, the land office clerk said, "Just plain carelessness on old Roger Baker's part. So sure he'd got everthing he never checked to make plumb certain. Here, young lady, just sign where I've put the crosses. If Sam Meade had guessed what's goin' to happen now, he'd not been so smug and self-satisfied when he left here a while ago!"

"You mean," put in Lois, startled, "that Sam Meade has been here already this morning? Does that mean he's filed on the claim my uncle thought was his? Are we homeless, Uncle and I?"

"You sure would be, Miss Tunnell," returned Bert grimly, "if Hasty Tyler hadn't been a right observin' jasper as well as a quick-actin' cowboy. It's plain now that old skinflint Ezry Pelly and Meade were in cahoots to keep any outsider from gettin' the Moss Creek Valley. I'd like to get hold of Ezry and make him pay through the nose, but he's vamoosed."

Hasty, watching Lois sign as indicated, remarked, "Someone else'll pay through the nose soon, or I'm cockeyed. Miss Lois didn't know this was comin' up, so she hasn't the money now. But I'm pretty sure we'll be back soon with plenty to pay the fees. As far as I'm concerned though, I'm on my uppers till I land another job."

Half a block up the street, while Lois was trying to tell Hasty how grateful she was, the two found Sam Meade blocking their way.

Ignoring the cowboy, he addressed himself to Lois. "Didn't I tell you I'd not stand for your runnin' around with other fellows? I'm tellin' you plain you'd better ditch that down-and-outer and play ball with me. Otherwise I'll throw your uncle off my land, *muy pronto.*"

Lois paled at the words of the vindictive rancher, from whom had dropped all the veneer shown at her earlier meetings with him.

"Your land!" she exclaimed. "But I just—" She looked at Hasty whose fingers were clenching and unclenching as he held his temper and waited for Sam to commit himself further.

"Yeh, mine," Sam was going on. "I beat you to the punch, Hasty. I took up old Tunnell's claim and Blink got yours. You poor fool! To let old Ezry hoodwink you. As for you, girl, you'll do like I say or you'll move."

The anger which surged through the cowboy seemed to crackle out of the ends of his flaming mop of hair as if he were a Fourth of July Roman candle! He moved to within a foot of Sam, and from his superior five inches glared down at the rancher's smug features.

Lois cried out in dismay, "You've no reason to make us move. *I've* just filed on that land Uncle thought he had taken up."

"You're talkin' through your hat, girl," snorted Sam rudely. "Ain't I just told you how Blink and me—"

"Miss Tunnell just filed on land ten times more valuable," put in Hasty quietly. "Her homestead is *in the heart of the O P L ranch.* Not only is it the best meadow land, but all the buildings are on it as well!"

"You're lyin'!" shouted Sam. "That—that just can't be!"

"Go look at the records," drawled Hasty.

"Needn't bother, Sam," interrupted a new voice as Nate Alcott joined the group. "What Hasty says is correct. Miss Lois Tunnell has a quarter section of land right spang in the middle of the O P L!"

And suddenly all the arrogant smug assurance left Sam Meade. His face turned to a sickly grayish hue. He

swallowed twice unable to speak.

Lois was looking at Hasty with something in her brown eyes which was causing that young man to feel as if electric sparks were shooting through him. Now she spoke:

"You did this for me, Hasty? You had me file on this valuable land so we could—"

"Could put one over on me," broke in Sam Meade harshly. "Well, you've got me where the hair's short, for I can't let nobody have that hundred and sixty, right in the middle of the O P L. How much you askin', girl?"

With a brilliant smile, and a gesture of her head toward Hasty, Lois answered, "You must consult my new manager. He knows much more about it all than I do."

Hasty drew a long, ecstatic breath, and said, "Five thousand dollars, Sam. Don't argue, either. That's the only and the last price." And to the girl, "With that much cash you and your uncle can buy a good small ranch."

"It's a hold-up!" grated Sam. "But I'll pay it tomorrow. Aw, if I hadn't throwed in with— I mean listened to old Ezry Pelly— Why the hell didn't he know 'bout this?"

"Maybe he did," remarked Nate Alcott, with a dry smile. "Maybe Ezry was lyin' low till some settler came along with enough cash to make it worth Ezry's while to locate him on the O P L and sting you proper."

Hasty, watching Sam Meade's face twitch as the man hunched his shoulders and turned away, thought, "This is the worst lickin' he could get. A lickin' as'll keep him put for a long, long time."

"Well," the cowboy remarked to Lois and the bald-headed surveyor who were watching Sam Meade shuffle along the street, "I got to get me a job, now I lost my claim. Can you give me one, Nate, helpin' you?"

"No," said Lois firmly, "Mr. Alcott can't give you a job. You're to be my foreman, cowboy, and help Uncle Ad and me find a suitable location, then build up a big, fine ranch."

Some time later, well along the road to the valley of Moss Creek, Hasty reached over, caught the reins of Lois' pony and brought both ponies to a halt. Looking the girl straight in the eyes, he remarked slowly, "It's only fair to warn you, little girl, that you're goin' to have trouble, keepin' me just as your manager, when I'm lovin' you from the bottom of my heart. You better know it now, so if you want to prevent me from askin' you a million times to marry me, you can—"

Lois tilted up her head, her brown eyes dancing, her lips curved in a lovely smile. She interrupted Hasty's tumbling words. "If that's going to be the case, perhaps we better get it over with now. If you really want me for *your* manager, tell me so, and I'll undertake the job."

And Hasty, never in a greater hurry than now, asked the question which turned earth to Heaven for him.

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Pete and Repeat

By William Freeman Hough

The Old Puncher proves that even skunks can be mighty helpful when a cow-poke's gal needs money and he needs her.

"IT SURE beats me," said Sheriff Sam Fort as he dropped into a chair and mopped a moist brow. "I'd of bet a thousand dollars—"

"Too much to put on one hoss," mumbled the Old Puncher.

"Hoss? Who said anything about a hoss?"

"Huh!" The Old Puncher sat up with a jerk. "Guess I must of been drowsin', Sheriff."

The Old Puncher stared into the heated street before the Silver City Hotel, pruned his straggling mustache with gnarled fingers and tried to connect the half-heard words of the sheriff with some recent event. And at last his mind clicked.

"Oh, the bank robbery! Well, I ain't none s'prised, Sam. That was a purty slick job. I don't figger you'll be ketchin' them fellas soon."

"They've been caught," announced the sheriff. "That's what beats me."

"Seems as though I don't tally your line of thought. Why should it beat you if they're caught?"

Sheriff Sam Fort sighed heavily. "Clyde Baker caught the crooks."

"No! Not Clyde! Must be a fluke to it. Clyde ain't got the courage—"

"That's the part that beats me," confessed the sheriff. "I hired Clyde on

as a deputy 'cause his father and me was old friends down in Tombstone; just kept him on the payroll for old times' sake. He ain't never showed a spark of courage up to now. Just one of them timid souls."

"Yeah, I know, Sam. I've seen him eatin' here in the hotel and never once has he had enough nerve to ask Sally Binders for a second cup of coffee. Just stared longingly at the big pot until she guessed what he wanted. When she'd bring the java he'd actual blush."

"Just a shy violet, Punch, up to yesterday. He still don't look as though he had the guts to swat a fly, but dang me if he didn't fetch them fellas in."

"How come?" asked the Old Puncher.

"Well, you know I had a false alarm come from Gateway. Somebody phoned me the saloon down there had been stuck up. So I takes Chet Byers, Clint Jones and Harve Drummy with me and we burns the grit. But they don't know nothin' about it at Gateway. It was just a trick to get me'n the boys outa town here so them gents could stick up the bank. I'd left Clyde at home on account I didn't think he was any good for such a job.

"Well, he was asleep down at the jail when the thing happened, but when he heard about it he rubbs the sleep outa his eyes, climbs in that old hunkola he calls a automobile and starts down the road after the fellas. He had the right hunch when he turned off the side road; it was pure luck when he found 'em stalled in a ditch; but it was downright nerve that made him throw a gun on the bandits, stick the cuffs on 'em and bring 'em in."

"Well, I swan!" exclaimed the Old Puncher.

"What gets me, too, is that he don't seem to think nothin' about it. I'll bet he'll be just as shy as ever."

"Mebbe it takes somethin' like that to rouse the fightin' blood in a man. Which reminds me of Pete Bolles."

"Who was he?" inquired the unwary sheriff.

PETE BOLLES (began the Old Puncher) was a deputy under Sheriff Newt Trund, down in Wahoo County. That's the county where the new highway went through 'bout three years back. You recall all the talk that caused. A lot of gas stations starts up, and tourist camps, too.

Well, seems Sheriff Trund hires on Pete because he's young and seems likely to get along with strangers what might be encountered traveling along the road.

But Pete is never no officer at heart. He drifts up and down the highway in an old roadster, watchin' out for speeders and wrecks. Half the time he's off the road hisself on account he'd go to sleep, and Newt's gettin' kinda disgusted. But patrolin' that highway is how Pete come to meet pretty Mable Dorset.

Now, Mable's past history is kinda vague to me. I only know she has a curio shop just outside of Wallace. A purty little gal with a sort of positive way about her. She's made up her mind to make a livin' outa sellin' Easterners curios they could buy cheaper at home. Which same she does to some extent. But business ain't so good—not near so good as she thought it'd be. Folks go whizzin' by in their cars instead of stoppin'. The shop is too near the town of Wallace, see, and folks go on to town to buy.

Well, after Pete gets acquainted with Mable he quits a lot of his patrolin'. That old roadster gets so it just natural turns in to Mable's shop every day. And there he sets on the porch with her, drinkin' lemonade and watchin' the cars go by. Behind him, inside the little shop, is the dangdest conglomeration of blankets, mud vases, baskets, beads and post-cards you ever saw, and all mortgaged by banker Henry Caswell in Wallace. It seems that Mable had to borrow some of the money to buy the stuff. In which I allus figgered it's the poorest invest-

ment Henry ever made. And he must of got a bit worried, too, 'cause he begins to press Miss Mable for some interest money.

"Pete," she says to the deputy one hot afternoon, "something has got to be done. Business is getting worse instead of better. Folks just glance at the shop as they go by. If they see my new sign it don't seem to have any effect."

"Tell you what, Mable," he says spittin' out a lemon seed. "I'll think up some way to stop 'em right in front of the shop. Mebbe I could say that I was lookin' over their cars as required by law. Then, once they're stopped, I'll invite 'em to have a look at the best curio shop in Arizony."

"That comes almost under the heading of graft," she says. "You'll get yourself fired. No," with a sigh, "that won't do at all. We've got to think up something better," and fans herself with a couple of fly-specked post-cards from the rack standin' near the door.

That "we" part pleases Pete. It sort of associates the two of 'em, if you know what I mean. Of course he's in love with her—plumb and tee-total in love. About the fondest thing he dreams of is a little valley ranch somewheres with nobody on it but him an' Mable. You see, Pete had been a top rider before he hired out to Sheriff Trund, but like lots of young fellas he'd felt the call to wear a star and get full of authority. He'd been wishin' he was back polishin' saddle leather when he met up with Mable. That changed his notion immediate.

They sit there silent for a time, watchin' the heat waves on the knolls and the mirages back of the mesa. Of course somethin' has to be done, but Pete has shot his load of brains with the none too smart idee of stoppin' cars. So he just relapses into sleepy wonder. Mable is thinkin' of Banker Caswell and the money she owes him.

Then, of a sudden, Mable pops the silence wide open. "Pete, I've got it!"

"Got what?" he asks gazin' at her.

"A good idea. Why didn't I think of it before?"

"I dunno. Mebbe it's the heat. Shoot the works."

Well," she says sort of triumphant, "you know that old Indian who runs a curio shop on the highway east of Flagstaff?"

"Nope; never met him. Why?"

"He's smart. He's got a way of attracting tourists."

"Now listen, Mable. If you think I'm goin' to dress up like an Injun and do war dances out front just to attract—"

"No, no; not that, Pete. What we need is a wild animal, native to this State, chained in front of the shop."

"Seems as though," he opines, "that such wouldn't make a very good welcome mat."

She don't seem to hear this last. Lookin' off over the hills her eyes take on a sort of dreamy sparkle. "Pete, I want a mountain lion."

"You want—huh?"

"Get me a lion right away."

Pete scratches the back of his sunburned neck. Right off he couldn't think of a mountain lion that wasn't workin'. You just couldn't reach out, grab holt of the tail or the head, whatever was handy, drag a lion up to the shop and say, "Here you are, lady. Comb the fleas outa him and tie a blue ribbon 'round his neck."

On the other hand, here is a critical situation. Furthermore, he's made it a practice of pleasin' Mable. What she wants he gets, if it's possible. Like the time he raided a Hopi house and stole a ceremonial blanket which was so full of little animals he liked to scratched hisself to death afore he got it to the shop. The blanket ain't never sold. But a lion is different, quite a bit different.

"Well, I'll see what I can do," he says.

"You're a dear. I know you can find one for me. And do hurry."

"Listen," he says sort of hopeful. "How about a nice basketful of snakes.

I could go out and ketch up a mess in no time."

"Snakes are repulsive to the average tourist. They won't do."

"Then mebbe a badger. I know a fella up in Wyoming who'd send one if I wrote to him."

"Too common, Pete."

"Then—then—"

"I want a mountain lion, Pete."

"All right," he says with a sigh. "I'll do my best."

ELL, for more'n a week the folks in and around Wallace think Pete Bolles is touched by the heat. He seems to have mountain lions, or cougars, as some folks call 'em, on the brain. Of an evenin' he drifts around to the saloon and makes casual inquiries about the critters. Has anyone seen one lately; is there anybody up at the Grand Canyon trappin' 'em anymore; when is the next circus comin' to town. And so on.

Finally, plumb desperate, he telephones the zoo in Los Angeles. The fella in charge there advises him to keep in the shade and drink nothin' but water, backin' up the advice by telegraphin' Sheriff Trund that there was a fella by the name of Bolles in his town who either has the delirium shakes or has been out in the sun too much.

"What does this mean?" bawls Trund shakin' the message in Pete's face.

Pete explains the best he can.

Trund grunts. "So that's where you've been spendin' your time—down at that puny curio shop! And me payin' you good wages for it. Well, you're fired! You hear? Fired!"

"And to hell with you too!" barks Pete losin' his temper. "Pin this tin badge on the bosom of some other maverick." He climbs into his old roadster and heads out into the hills.

From then on he hunts right earnest for a mountain lion. He combs that country plumb thorough, even goin' as far as the Injun's curio shop east of Flag, aimin' to buy the chief's cat off'n him. But Walapai Joe explains he ain't got the lion no more. The old fella had done dropped over with heart failure one day when he saw a bulldog climb out of a tourist's automobile. So at last Pete turns back home very sad and very disappointed.

"For heaven's sake where have you been?" asks Mable when he stops at the curio shop.

"Out huntin' your lion," he says. "Of which there ain't a trace of one. The sheriff vented his brand on me, so I just headed for the hills."

"I'm sorry about that, Pete. I heard he'd fired you. When I learned about it I tried to find you to tell you I'd changed my mind."

"Changed your mind!"

"About the lion, I mean. I got to thinking what one would cost to feed and come to the conclusion I couldn't afford it. Not that I've given up the idea of attracting tourists," she adds hasty. "I've decided on something smaller than a mountain lion. And I've located them."

"Them?" he says.

"Yes, Pete. Some skunks."

"Whoa!" he bellers. "Your idee is all wrong there. I guess you've never met up with 'em, even one of 'em."

"I've seen pictures of skunks, Pete, and I think they're very cute."

"Handsome is as handsome does, and when a skunk does—well, it's time to be in distant parts." He rolls a cigarette with shakin' fingers. "Forget the skunks, Mable. They're dynamite. Why, hell's fire, honey, if you fetched a skunk here they'd have to change the highway. Anything but them critters will do."

"But I've already made arrangements for a pair of young skunks."

Pete sinks down on the bench outside the shop door and mops his forehead. Mable sets beside him and pats his hand.

"Don't worry," she soothes. "The skunks I'm buying have been made—

well, inoperative. There's an old fellow south of here that raises them for pets. He fixes them so that they can't cause an odorous disturbance."

"But who's goin' to know that?" he asks. "Put a pair of skunks out in front of this shop and every car passin' will break the speed limit."

Mable explains that she'll have a large sign painted and put up along the highway a quarter of a mile from the shop. This sign will invite tourists to stop at the shop and get their first close view of twin skunks, perfectly harmless, very beautiful and friendly. Couldn't Pete see the psychology of that? Folks has always feared skunks; now they can see some without runnin' the risk of the usual danger. It'll be a great drawing card.

"Danged if I don't think you've got somethin' there," he admits. "It's human nature for folks to want to see somethin' they've always had to avoid. Natural curiosity. When do you get the critters?"

"I've been waiting for you to come back with the car, Pete. We can go get them today."

There's a song nowdays that says somethin' about mad dogs and Englishmen goin' out in the mid-day sun. Whoever wrote that tra-la overlooked Pete Bolles and Mable Dorset. It's noon when they close the shop, climb into the roadster and head down the highway. At the second side road they turn off and start south over the hills, and it's so hot you can smell cactus burnin'.

Pete drives kinda slow on account he doesn't want his old chariot to melt down and run out from under 'em. The road is narrow and purty rutty, not bein' used much. It goes up over hills and around 'em, sometimes splittin' the difference and windin' along half-way between top and bottom. Then they come to a dry wash, an arroyo, that's dang near straight up and down. But Pete centipedes the old crate in and out, never breakin' a spring or gettin' stuck.

About three o'clock they catch a whiff of somethin' that tells Pete they are gettin' close to their destination. You don't need no second guess to tell that Hank Vollrich has been a mite too late in makin' some of his pets inoperative.

Standin' in front of a shack is an old gent with legs so bowed you can throw a sheep dog between 'em and never touch a hair. And he must sleep on his face 'cause he shore has a mattress of whiskers. He squints at 'em as they drive up, grins and never shows a tooth on account he ain't got any.

"Howdy, ma'am? Come for them skunks?"

"That's right, Mr. Vollrich. Are they ready?"

"Got 'em boxed up for you." He goes around the side of the shack, picks up a homemade crate and lugs it out. "Nice little fellers," he tells her. "I call 'em Pete and Repeat."

"Sort of a double barreled proposition," mutters Pete. "And why pick on me?"

Mable bends over the crates and looks in. They are cute little devils, all right; black but with a white stripe down the back. And beautiful tails. They paw at the slats of the crate and make little chirrin' sounds at her. "Oh, the little dears," she murmurs.

Pete don't get so close right at first. A man what's seen a skunk's battle flag wavin' ain't apt to forget it in a hurry. He has a hard time standin' in one spot, it bein' sort of an instinct to get as far from them skunks as his legs will carry him. Hank Vollrich relates all the information regarding feed for 'em, and gives out other experience which he's acquired.

"I'll treat them like babies," Mable assures him. "And now, how much do I owe you?"

"Well," says Hank with another toothless grin, "it ain't often I get a chance to give a purty gal a present. They're yours, free and clear."

"Oh, thanks so much."

Hank turns to Pete. "Young feller,

have you ever heard of the Lost Dutchman Mine?"

"Sure; who ain't?"

Hank Vollrich gets confidential. "I'm about to find it," he whispers. "Been huntin' for years, and now I'm about to collect. Do you want to get in on it?"

"Well, no, not just now," says Pete, thinking the old boy is skunk nutty. "I've got some chores to do."

"Too bad, too bad. It wouldn't cost you nothin' to join me."

"Later, mebbe. And I'll keep it all a secret."

"That's good. I knowed I could trust you."

Pete makes hisself stoop down and pick up the crate. Right gingerly he carries it over and puts it in the rumble seat. Then he waits until Mable finishes a last pow-wow with Old Hank. Ten minutes later they start back around the hill.

"What was he saying about a mine?" she asks. "Is there one hereabouts?"

"Somewhere in this country is a mine called the Lost Dutchman. It seems that the fella who found the place had a hard time gettin' out. He was packin' a passle of gold with him. But when he tried to go back he couldn't find his strike. Went plumb crazy. And since that time men have been goin' crazy tryin' to find it. That's what's happened to Hank Vollrich—he's gone crazy."

"Oh, the poor old fellow."

"Don't worry about him, Mable. He's a dang sight happier thinkin' he'll find the mine than a heap of others what'll never look for it. The thing that bothers me is, knowin' that he is crazy, has he actual fixed them skunks like you said. He might of just imagined he fixed 'em, like he imagines he's found the Lost Dutchman."

"Why—why, nothing has happened," she says feelin' a pang of doubt.

"Not yet, honey. But a skunk don't git into action till he's proper scared or mad. We're goin' to take the bumps awful easy on this back trip."

"Maybe we'd better whisper," she suggests.

"Oh, I ain't goin' to say anythin' to make 'em mad. Not me. I'm goin' to hope that if it happens it'll be at a place where we won't be hampered none in gettin' away from this car. It's a hot day, Mable, but if somethin' lets go there in the back end I'll make the first hundred feet in next to nothin' flat."

"Oh, no! You'd leave me here in the car?"

"Shucks, you'd be ahead of me."

You can see that they is kinda worried. But after the first few miles with nothing happening to disturb the ozone, they begin to relax. Mable thinks that mebbe the old man isn't crazy after all, and that it might be a good thing for Pete to check up on the mine with him.

But Pete shakes his head. He knows too many stories about the Lost Dutchman. He has to have money, of course, if he expects to marry her. The way to get money, he surmises, is to find another job, one not too far from her. After they paint the big sign tellin' of the novelty to be seen at the Dorset Curio Shop, he'll start looking.

"I've half a notion to call it Shoppee," Mable says. "It might draw more attention."

"Well, there's some things in the place that'd give even a digger Injun a permanent wave," he opines.

PETE and Mable are down on a flat section of the road, driving home most careful, when, out of a beautiful mirage just ahead, they spy somethin' emerge. At first it looks like a big spider with a white plume stickin' out of its head, but as they get closer Pete sees that it's another car. It's half on, half off the road and the white plume is steam comin' out of the radiator. Somebody has been drivin' too fast. But who would take this side road?

"I can see two men there, Pete,"

Mable says. "Walking around and around the car."

"Kind of puzzled and anxious, too. Mebbe I can give 'em a hand. It's no joke to be stuck out here in this desert."

They draw up beside the other car and look it over. It's one of them big ones with no top on it, and Pete sees right off that they ain't none prepared for a stretch of hot weather—no extra water or nothin'. As a matter of fact Both men are kinda tall and hungry lookin'. Mean, too, Pete finds out presently.

"Stuck, eh?" he says.

"Naw," growls one. "We just come out for a picnic."

"Well, you got a nice start," observes Pete. "Anything I can do?"

"What do you think? Know anything about automobiles?"

"I'm drivin' one."

"You call that peanut a car?"

"It's got four wheels and it runs, brother. What you got?"

"Aw, cut it," snaps the second man. "If he can get us started again, that's the main thing."

Pete gets down and walks around the big car. It smells plenty hot. He lifts the hood and peers at the engine. Ain't nothin' particular wrong in sight, so he tells one of 'em to give it a whirl. But when the engine starts it sends out more noises than an Apache drum at a war dance. He signals to stop it.

"Burned out your main bearings," he states. "Must of run low in oil. The only way to fix it is drop the pan and shim up them bearings so you can get to a mechanic. I've got some leather you can use. Always have some with me just in case. But you'll have to have some fresh oil."

"Sounds just dandy," snarls the tallest of the two.

"Maybe," says Mable, "we could tow them to the highway."

Pete looks at his little old hunkola and shakes his head. He couldn't snag that heavy car over the road that lay ahead.

"We ain't going that way," says the other one.

"Well, there sure ain't nothin' to head for south of here. Unless you gents are aimin' to give the Lost Dutchman a whirl."

"Don't know the Dutchman." The fella speakin' squints his eyes at Pete. "It looks like we'd have to take your bus, guy."

"Take mine? I reckon not."

Quick as a flash the tall fella whips out a gun. "I said we was takin' your car, bozo."

"But, please," cries Mable. "You wouldn't leave us out here on the desert!"

"Wouldn't we, baby? Say, that'd be the least of our troubles. Take that iron off'n his hip, Joe," he says to his pal.

They take Pete's gun and order Mable out of the car. Pete's eyes begin to glint. This is nothin' short of highway robbery and he tells 'em so.

"Robbery?" snorts the man called Joe. "Oh, dear no; we wouldn't think of such a thing. We're just borrowin' this heap of yours. Step aside and don't even look as though you'd try any foolish tricks."

They back Pete and Mable up a few steps. One man holds a gun on 'em while the other reaches in the big car and lifts out a canvas sack. They put it in the seat of Pete's roadster and climb in.

"You ought to thank us," sneers the fella who aims to drive Pete's crate. "Now you two can have plenty of time to be alone and make love. Just a couple of love birds alone on the desert. That'll be nice."

"If you gents was just plain, ordinary snakes," snaps Pete, "I'd—"

"Yeah? What would you do, yokel?"

They start to back so they can get the roadster turned around. Pete is thinkin' right fast, wonderin' if he dares to make a dive at the gent holdin' the gun. Mable is wringing her hands and tryin' not to cry. "Please," she begs, "don't hurt the skunks."

"Huh? Hurt what?"

"The skunks."

"What skunks?"

"Mebbe you jaspers don't know it," bawls Pete, "but there's a box of skunks in that rumble seat."

The fella holdin' the gun twists about and stares at the crate behind. He sees two furry things with white stripes down their backs. "Good Gawd!" he croaks. "It *is* skunks!"

"Throw the damn things out," snaps his pard.

"Like hell I will. You throw 'em out. Hey! One has got its head through the slats." He stands up ready to make a dive for safety. The gent drivin' the car means to put on the brakes. Instead he put his foot down on the throttle dingus. The roadster jumps ahead, rams a front wheel into the side rut and comes to a stop so quick the driver cracks his head on the windshield. The other does a swan dive clean across him and lights on his neck.

That's Pete's chance. Just like he was bulldoggin' a steer he throws hisself forward and pounces on the man on the ground. He yanks the gun outa his hand and cracks him over the head with it. Leapin' up, he whirls to face the other gent. But he's out like a lantern on a windy night, layin' across the wheel with his belly pressin' the horn button. Pete's old bus is bellerin' like a beast in mortal agony.

It don't take Pete a minute to drag out a coil of rope which he always carried and bind them two fellas up as only a puncher used to piggin' steers can. After which he straightens up, mops the sweat off his brow and grins at Mable.

"Seems to me," he says, "that if Pete and Repeat had any notions of defence they'd of let go by this time."

"Poor little fellows," she murmurs peerin' into the crate. "They seem frightened."

"They'll get over that. By golly, they sure did save us from a mess. I aim to load these fellas onto the car and take 'em back to town. I ain't no deputy now, but I sure know highway robbery when I see it."

Mable climbs into the seat while he hoists the two fellas onto the front fenders and lashes 'em down. It'll be dang uncomfortable there so close to the engine, but he should worry about that. And while he's taking a last hitch on the rope and tellin' one fella to quit groanin', Mable's hand touches the canvas sack beside her.

"Pete!" she cries. "This thing is full of money—currency, all wrapped up in bank bands."

"Well, I'll be a son of a gun!" he declares comin' back to look for hisself. "Say, them bands has Wallace State Bank printed on 'em." He looks up at her, eyes goin' wide.

"So that's it!" he says, as it begins to dawn on him. "No wonder these gents was speedin' up a side road. They held up the bank in town." He whirls around and goes back to the gent tied on the left side. "Bandit, eh?" he raps out. "Held up the bank, did you?"

"Aw, go to hell," snarls the prisoner loudly.

"We'll see who heads for them parts, mister."

WELL, it's a long, slow drive back to the highway. The little old roadster is purty heavy loaded and the road is rough. But they make it all right, with the extra passengers cussin' blue blazes. Once at the curio shop they unload the skunks and then go on into Wallace, which said town is in an uproar over the robbery, which had took place while the banker, Henry Caswell, was alone in the bank. After the hold-up gents had left he called Sheriff Trund who, with a coupla deputies, climbed in a car to give chase. But they'd gone on down the highway, missin' the side road complete. Aren't even back when Pete and Mable get to town.

Pete takes his prisoners down to the

county jail and turns 'em over to the jailer there. Then he and Mable drive up to the bank which is still full of folks talkin' about the affair, and hands the sack of money over to Henry Caswell.

"Who—where'd you get this?" gasps the banker.

Pete explains how he and Mable had met up with the fellas and the reason they'd been out on that road. She'd wanted a pair of skunks to use as a tourist attraction, on account business was so bad and she was worryin' about the money she owed.

Banker Caswell piles his currency on the counter, counts it and heaves a big sigh of relief.

"That was very fast thinking," he admits. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if those men wouldn't have gotten clean away if you hadn't mentioned the skunks. Miss Dorset, I thank you."

"Is that the best you can do?" asks Pete.

Henry Caswell looks at the curious crowd that's standin' around in the bank. "Humph—er, well, supposing we just cancel your note and mortgage, Miss Dorset. Certainly I can afford that much reward."

Sheriff Trund comes through, too. That is, he offers Pete his old job again. But Pete had been overcome by a smart spell. He turns down the offer. If there's any reward out for those two fellas he wants it all hisself, rememberin' that Trund is in the habit of makin' his deputies split such money with him.

There's a reward out, all right—fifteen hundred dollars, which Pete collects in due time. And with that much in the bank he and Mable get married. Come election time he runs against Sheriff Trund and beats him. They're still livin' at the curio shop, Mable runnin' the place while Pete tends to his sheriff job. Mighty happy couple, too.

SAM FORT glanced at the Old Puncher who was stabbing a gnarled thumb into the charred bowl of his pipe. "That," he said, "was a nice story, Punch, but it don't fit this case. Pete Bolles wasn't no shy violet like my deputy."

"Mebbe not. I was just citin' the instance of what can happen out on a side road. You got to admit that your deputy had a sudden jolt of nerve when he captured those fellas single-handed. Of course, Pete was aided and abetted by them two skunks. Still, he took a chance just the same as did your Clyde Baker."

"By the way, Punch, how are those twins?"

"Just fine, Sam. The last time I saw 'em they was toddlin' around just as cute as could be. It won't be long before they can talk."

"What? You mean they've learned Pete and Repeat how to talk?"

"Not Pete and Repeat, you ranny. I'm speakin' of young Peter and his twin sister Mable."

"Oh, I see. But I was inquirin' about them skunks."

The Old Puncher struck a match and touched off his pipe. "Pete and Repeat," he said between puffs, "are plenty fat and saucy. They've got a nice pen back of the curio shop, where they won't be annoyed by tourists who always want to pet 'em and gawk at 'em."

Beginning in the next issue
A New Serial of Western Courage
VENGEANCE IN VIGIL
By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

Part Three

Sunbeam of the Sage-Brush

By Stephen Payne

SYNOPSIS

DORA BECKWORTH, daughter of a tramp sheepman, L. G. BECKWORTH.

CLAY McDERMOTT, the young owner of the Circle C, in love with Dora.

JOE McDERMOTT, Clay's twin brother.

IRA PICKETT and RALPH H. MORTIMER, local ranchers.

JIM HADLEY, sheriff; AXEL PIERCE, deputy sheriff.

QUICKER'N SCAT, Clay's cowhand.

SLICK CARD CORSON, a gambler.

BEAVER LONG BOW, old-time Indian hunter and expert trailer.

BARFLY WEBB, Elkhart hanger-on who knew Joe and his woman friend, Keno Kate.

L. G. Beckworth is running his sheep on Porcupine Flats, which belong to Clay McDermott. Because of his love for Dora, the rancher allows this to go on, but establishes a deadline beyond which the sheep may not graze.

Clay sends Quicker'n Scat off to mail a letter renewing his lease on Government range in the Twisty Hills. That same evening Clay is prevented from keeping a rendezvous with Dora by the arrival of his brother Joe, who is shot by an unidentified man who took Joe for Clay. Joe, whose body is found by Slick Card Corson, is

Beaver makes Clay take to the hills to escape the posse because Clay has no proof of his story and Barfly's body increases the appearances of guilt against him.

buried as Clay, while Clay, in order to get to the bottom of things, poses as Joe, the heir to the ranch.

Dora overhears her father paying a stranger for some secret job. On learning of Clay's supposed death, Dora is fearful that her father, who hates Clay, may be involved. L. G. Beckworth wants Dora to marry Ralph Mortimer, an oldish man who does not attract her.

Supposing Clay to be the easy-going Joe, Beckworth crosses the deadline and claims all of Porcupine Flats. Clay pretends to accept this. He discovers then that Ira Pickett has stolen some of his calves. However, sympathy for Pickett's family dissuades Clay from fighting him. Pickett tells Clay he knows he is not Joe. He threatens to expose Clay and claim he killed his own brother, unless Clay deeds him his ranch. Clay gives Pickett a beating and kicks him off the Circle C.

Mortimer, believing Clay to be Joe, pretends to have been Clay's friend and then discloses that he has secured a lease on Clay's range. Clay then realizes Quicker'n Scat never mailed his letter. Later Dora sees Scat's riderless horse on the range.

Dora feels strangely attracted to the man she believes to be Clay's twin. On the way home with the mail she stops by his home to cook his dinner. They are interrupted by Beckworth who forces Dora home. Looking through his mail Clay discovers Joe has left many debts in Elkhart and was involved with a woman called Keno Kate.

A man from Elkhart called Barfly Webb comes by the ranch, offering to give Clay important information about the murder, but he is shot by an unknown killer while talking to Clay.

Clay's next visitor is Beaver Long Bow to whom Clay tells the full story of Joe's murder. Beaver warns Clay that the posse is after him, believing he has killed his own brother.

CHAPTER X

The Chagrined Deputy

AFTER the trying ride home from the Circle C with her angry father there had been no other course open to Dora except to take to her own quarters once again. L. G. had not spoken to her all the way across Porcupine Flats. Even when they arrived at the camp, where a bright wood fire threw flickering light on sheep wagon and tents, where the dogs rushed vociferously to greet them and where mother was anxiously waiting to take the girl into her arms, the somber Beckworth did not speak directly to her.

To his wife he said, "If she really intended to run off, like you said, she

must have got cold feet. She wasn't in Long Bow, but folks there had seen her head back toward the Circle C. That's where I found her."

Mother didn't answer. She simply led Dora into her tent, where the girl sobbed on Mother's shoulder for a long time, with Mrs. Beckworth holding her close, her own eyes very damp.

When her mother had gone, the girl lay awake thinking, not of the tragedy at Circle C or of the one in her own life, but of the man McDermott. For their little while together this evening she had been so happy with him, and that because he seemed really the man she had known and loved these two years. The thought was fantastic, incredible, impossible, and yet the conviction grew that he was Clay. Impossible or not, he was Clay! He was!

So with her mind whirling, puzzling over unanswerable riddles, she fell into the dreamless sleep of exhaustion. In the first pale and misty light of dawn, she awakened to the hum of voices and the cheery crackle of a wood fire.

"You seen Joe McDermott?"

Dora could not place this curt voice. It sounded as if the speaker was in a bad humor, provoked, chagrined.

"Why would I be seein' him?" Beckworth was gruffly on the defensive.

"Don't s'pose you would be seein' the damned rascal in the middle of the night. Still, if he rode this way you might 'a' seen him. I asked you a civil question."

Tossing back the covers, Dora slid her feet into slippers, threw a blanket around her, and tiptoeing to the front of the tent, peered through a crack between its flaps. Deputy Sheriff Axel Pierce sat a little sidewise in his saddle, his horse close to the fire L. G. had just started. Hat pulled low, moon-round face unshaven, lower jaw set, Pierce was glowering down at the gaunt, raw-boned sheepman, who now retorted:

"What's rubbed your fur the wrong way?"

"Plenty! I'm so damned mad I could bite the shanks off my spurs."

"I noticed that," Beckworth commented dryly.

The deputy sheriff flared: "You'd be mad, too, if, after you'd run down the solution of a murder mystery, the guilty cuss slipped right through your fingers."

"Who's guilty of what?"

"Joseph Tecumseh McDermott is the man who shot and killed his own twin brother!"

A gasp escaped Dora's lips, but as a flaming stick crackled at the same moment, the gasp went unnoticed by Pierce and L. G.

Axel Pierce resumed: "But when I reached the Circle C late last night McDermott had pulled his freight. Beaver Long Bow—blast his tough old hide!—had tipped him off. Did I feel like hanging that old tracker! Beaver's the only man who won't believe McDermott's guilty."

"Good for Beaver Long Bow!" Dora thought. "And if he doesn't believe it, it means Clay isn't guilty."

"So-o?" whistled L. G. "I'd be interested to know the theory of that old scout and Indian fighter."

"Aw, never mind his theories. He's making himself to home at the Circle C, where he's up to his eyebrows in what he calls another mystery killing. Though there ain't no mystery about it a-tall," and the deputy sheriff's lips curled derisively. "No question in my mind neither but what Joe McDermott shot this fella from Elkhart known as Barfly Webb."

Dora Beckworth felt her knees shaking; her breath caught in her throat. Another death at Circle C! She saw her father staring blankly at Axel Pierce, who plunged on:

"News to you, eh? Well, in Elkhart, I made a lot of inquiries checkin' up on Joe McDermott. Joe was thick as thieves with one of them flashy women of the type that generally follows the rip-roarin' mining camps and is kinda out of place in a quiet cow-

town. But being way past her prime, she's likely ready to quiet down some.

"Now this Keno Kate had been staking Joe some, kinda playin' him along, and I wanted to get all the information out of her I could. But by the time I got around to call, she'd flew the coop.

"Howsoever, all the time I was in Elkhart there was this gamblin' house hanger-on, Barfly Webb, taggin' me, inquisitive as a skim-milk colt. I found he'd been sorta useful to Keno Kate a few times. So when I couldn't find her I looked for him. I hadn't seen him for several hours. Neither, it developed, had anybody else.

"The next I heard or saw of Barfly Webb was his dead body at the Circle C. Why'd he visited the Circle C? The answer's plain as the brand on a short-haired yearling. He aimed to shake Joe McDermott down for a piece of change, by telling McDermott that unless he kicked through, *pronto,* he'd see to it that Keno Kate brought suit against Joe for breach of promise, or somethin' of the kind.

"But Joe McDermott fooled Webb plenty; just up and shot the miserable rat. Nevertheless I've sent word to Elkhart to have Keno Kate trailed and arrested."

"It isn't true," the listening girl told herself fiercely. "Clay didn't shoot this Webb fellow!"

"What's Beaver Long Bow say 'bout it?" L. G. asked.

"Aw, hell! Never mind what he says," snorted the deputy. "I've got possemen and also Coyote Jack ridin' the hills, cutting for sign of McDermott. Coyote Jack being a darned good trailer we may fool that murderer and Beaver Long Bow. Another of my men took the body to town. . . . Beckworth, if you see McDermott, grab him and hold him. So long."

"How can Clay ever clear himself of those ugly charges?" Dora wondered. "How could I help?" In spite of what Axel Pierce had said, the mystery was as far from solved as ever, and there still remained that chilling fear of her father's guilt.

At the fire L. G. was now saying to Mrs. Beckworth, "I didn't raw-hide Dora about her hob-nobbing with that damned scoundrel, and I won't. But Ralph Mortimer is riding over here some time this forenoon. You see to it that the girl stays here and sees Ralph."

Upon hearing this, Dora slipped back into bed and pretended to be asleep. She would not eat breakfast with L. G. She'd wait until he was gone and then. . . . Then what?

An hour after Beckworth had ridden away to supervise his herders in moving the sheep to a new portion of the range, and the girl had ventured forth into the bright morning, the matter was decided for her.

"Hi there, sprite!" came a cheery hail, and old Beaver Long Bow, with his straggly, uncut hair, floppy black hat, greasy overalls and faded buckskin shirt loped to the campfire. He was riding one of Clay's horses, a bay. He carried a six-shooter, a knife and a small hatchet at his belt, a rifle was slung from his saddle-horn.

"Mornin', Mrs. Beckworth," he rattled on. "The old gent gone? I see he is. We-el, little starry eyes, you sho' look worried," smiling at Dora. "Are you?"

The girl, dressed in her cowboy outfit for riding, ran to his stirrup. "Beaver, you old brick, you don't know what it means to see you!" She lowered her voice for his ears alone. "To know I— Clay— We've got a friend."

"Hmn? Some dust got in my eyes," mumbled the old frontiersman. But it wasn't dust Dora saw there, and as he bent from his saddle, his voice was strangely husky. "'Course I savvy mofe'n anybody how you and Clay feel, so it's tougher'n tough to think—"

"Mother knows how I feel," she said quickly.

"Makes it consid'able easier then. Consid'able." Beaver straightened in his saddle. "Mrs. Beckworth, can I

take along this little sunbeam of the sage-brush, to help me hunt for tracks and sign?"

The woman smiled at the lean, wire-hard old scout. "You'll promise to take care of her?"

"Yes, ma'am, and I'll do her more good than twenty-four bottles of Toomley's Tone-up Tonic."

Light on her feet as a deer, happy once again, Dora sped to get Red Eagle, and Mrs. Beckworth spoke confidentially to Beaver:

"L. G. may be furious about this. Mortimer's coming and her father expects Dora to be here. Perhaps you know my husband found Dora at the Circle C yesterday evening and, Beaver, I could understand about my little girl and Clay, but this twin brother of Clay's. . . ."

"Don't worry, ma'am. Clay wasn't never like his brother. Keep it under your hat, Mrs. Beckworth, but the killer got the wrong man. He shot Joe McDermott. Clay's alive."

CHAPTER XI

Tracks and Trails

SIDE by side Dora Beckworth and Beaver Long Bow rode northward across Porcupine Flats. Far in the eastern distance heat haze was already beginning to rise. Gorgeous sunlight poured on Painted Brakes and the towering mountains beyond them. A vagrant wind rustled the sage. Otherwise all the rangeland was still, tranquil, beautiful.

The girl broke the silence: "Axel Pierce was at our camp and told us what happened last night, Beaver. . . . Where's Clay?"

"Painted Brakes. I'll tell you how to find him, but if you head up that way you'll be trailed."

"Oh! Then even you won't dare to meet Clay?"

"'Course I can meet him. The Great Spirit divided the day into two parts, the dark and the light. Sometimes the dark comes in powerful handy."

"Tell me about Clay, Beaver. Why he impersonated his twin brother."

After explaining these points, Beaver said he thought Clay had had a good hunch, but the plan had gone all haywire. "And gosh all moccasins! Sprite, if you and me don't get the danged killer we ain't going to be able to clear Clay."

Dora shivered thinking the trail might lead to her father. "Whom do you suspect, Beaver?"

He bit off a chew of tobacco and tugged at his hair. "Too many suspects. I'm tryin' to eliminate 'em. Ira Pickett was at Circle C that partic'lar night. I saw his tracks, but I didn't tell Pierce nor old Jim Hadley so."

"Why not, Beaver?"

"They'd have arrested him on suspicion. Pickett's family would 'a' suffered; no good been done."

"Pickett's family has kept him out of jail a good many times," commented Dora. "By the way this may help us some: The horse Quicker'n Scat was riding that night is now running with a band in Twisty Hills."

Beaver puckered his eyes against the morning sun, gazing afar. "Tracks of Scat's hoss was all messed up and blotted out by men from town long 'fore I got on the job," he remarked. "Impossible for me to larn what he did that night. Howsoever, a killer's a cold-blooded wolf with no more conscience'n a weasel. That cowboy was too plumb harmless to 'a' drygulched Joe McDermott."

Riding easily beside the old scout, Dora smiled at him. "I love to hear you reason things out. One suspect is now eliminated."

Beaver was going on: "My talk with Clay cleared up points I wish I'd knowed first off. The man we've got to find loped up to the Circle C house, saw Joe McDermott at the open door, shot him, then fuzzed on up the valley of Burnt Fork.

"Now Slick Card Corson was camped two miles upstream. But the tracks of

his saddler and his pack hoss didn't tally with the tracks of this killer's hoss. Furthermore, Slick Card couldn't 'a' waded downstream to Circle C without bein' forced to get out on the bank in many different places. He didn't go to Circle C until mornin', and I don't think he knows a darned thing more'n he told the sheriff."

"You've really been working on this job," Dora exclaimed.

"I wasted a heap of time checkin' up on blind leads, sprite. Suspicion now points straight as a gun barrel to a woman in Elkhart."

"I know about that from what Axel Pierce said," Dora put in. "Keno Kate had learned Joe would inherit a ranch, so she tried to hook him and—"

"And," said Beaver grimly, "it looks powerful like she tried to hurry up his inheritin' Circle C. Barfly Webb—trust his kind to be sneakin' 'round some dark corner, ears wide open—got wise to this. He figgered to cash in by sellin' out to Joe McDermott. Somebody smelt a rat, trailed Barfly, shot him. *Who was that somebody?*"

"Beaver," cried the girl. "If this is the right trail, it clears Mortimer and Pickett and—and everybody up here!"

"Uh-huh, but I'll remind you I was theorizin' some. Here we is at the valley of Burnt Fork, a mile or so above Circle C. Yonder's Pickett's headgate and this sign you see here on the bank of the creek was left by last night's drygulcher. The man who shot Webb.

"I was up here on his trail before I come to get you this mornin'. He was afoot. From this point he hoofed it downstream to Circle C, not carin' if he left tracks. He walked back up ag'in, stopped right here, sat him down, pulled off his shoes, tied 'em to his belt, pulled on the gum boots he had left here when he went downstream, and waded into the creek. But where'd he go?"

With this, Beaver went on to explain that the mounted man who had shot Joe McDermott, had successfully hidden his trail at this same place on Burnt Fork Creek. The old scout had been exploring upstream, finding many places where it was impossible for either a man or a horse to surmount obstacles in the channel. Yet he could not find tracks on either side of that channel. "I'm stumped," he concluded.

Dora's dark brows drew together. She gazed up the narrow valley and down it, gazed at the rippling water in the shallow stream and then very thoughtfully at Ira Pickett's headgate.

"That fellow's stealing Clay's water again," she said. "I'm going to shut it off."

Beaver chuckled, "You sure make Clay's battles yours."

He watched the supple girl ride across the stream, dismount at the simple plank headgate and start to lower the board gate. Suddenly she paused.

"I've got an idea," she called excitedly. "Come over here. Was this ditch running that other morning when you trailed the drygulcher—the horsebacker—this far upstream?"

"Sho' it was," the old scout joined Dora. "Pickett had snuck up and opened the gate after dark. 'Twas no trouble to see what he'd done. What's that got to—?"

"Beaver, if this ditch had water in it as it has now, a horse's tracks or a man's wouldn't have lasted a minute after they were made in the bottom of it, would they?"

"'Course not."

"An active horse could step over the cross braces of this dinky headgate—walk through the headgate, I mean—and go down along the ditch. And likewise that man afoot, the rifleman of last night who stopped over yonder and put on his gum boots, could have—"

"Say no more, li'l' sprite!" Beaver's eyes shone with admiration. "I been dumb as a buffalo. Gimme your hand. I want to squeeze it hard. . . . Look! Couple or three hoss hairs stuck to a sliver on one of them cross-braces. The gentleman's hoss scraped his leg a lit-

tle bit. . . . Up in your saddle, partner. You ride on one side the ditch, me on t'other!"

Pickett's ditch, climbing the side hill on a slow and even grade, passed over the point of the hill and thence ran down the high benchland north of the Circle C ranch. At one point the road from Long Bow to Circle C crossed it at a shallow ford. But before Beaver and Dora reached this ford they found a place in the dense sage-brush quite near an aspen grove, where the man wearing rubber boots—last night's rifleman—had climbed out of the ditch.

He had seated himself on a sage-brush, removed his rubber boots and put on his riding boots. Beaver pointed out where the butt end of his rifle had rested while he was thus engaged. Carrying boots and gun he had walked to the grove, where, in the midst of the dense, leafy aspens had been tied a horse. Even Dora had no difficulty in reading from the sign how the man had tied the boots behind his saddle, scabbarded his rifle, swung up and ridden away. Old Beaver, eyes snapping with excitement and anticipation, straightened up from an intense study of the horse's tracks.

"Li'l' sprite, it's the same hoss! The same hoss the man who shot Joe was ridin'!"

"Then the same man is responsible for both murders! Let's trail him, Beaver."

The old scout, however, had mounted and was once again riding slowly down the bank of the ditch. How glad Dora was that she and Clay had such a staunch friend! A friend indeed. Only yesterday he had ridden sixty miles at breakneck speed to save Clay from arrest—from something far more terrible, from a lynching!

Beaver stopped, slid from his ancient saddle and bending over, began to move along in the heavy sage. In a minute he jumped on his horse and raced back to the girl.

"After all this long lapse of time the sign was powerful dim where the jigger that night shot Joe, jumped his hoss up outa the ditch and hit off across country," he shouted. "But 'twas there! Now we know how he made his get-away. Let's follow this plainer track."

Abreast they rode through the sage across the level reaches and the hills and valleys of Twisty Hills range—Dora thrilling to this man-hunt with old Beaver. But when they found where the horseman had struck the main road, the girl lamented: "Such a confusion of tracks here even you can't trail him any more."

"Deputy Pierce and his posse made most of these," said Beaver. "You take one side the road; I'll take t'other and we'll see if our man went on to Long Bow."

Presently they found where the rider had evidently heard or seen the posse approaching from the direction of town. He had ridden for a hundred yards off of the road, induced his horse to lie down flat in the heavy sage, crouched there himself, and watched the men pass. After this, he had resumed his journey to Long Bow.

"We'll comb the town for that hoss!" announced the scout. "A well trained bay hoss—"

"A bay?" Dora looked at the man blankly. "How do you know?"

Beaver chuckled, "Sprite, don't tell me you missed all them hairs left stickin' to the sage when the hoss lay down!"

"Oh! I'm afraid as a tracker I don't stack up very high."

"'Twas you found the ditch trail. We'd still be plumb treed if you hadn't."

Upon arriving at Long Bow they looked first at the livery stable, and then, on one pretext and another, investigated all private stables and corrals in town. When the old frontiersman finally stepped out of the last of these and shook his head in a signal of defeat, Dora realized they had found the assassin's trail only to lose it again.

"The breaks of the game, sprite."

CHAPTER XII

Quicker'n Scat

SEATED in the Best Meal Restaurant, the girl sighed. "You're sure the horse isn't here?"

Beaver shook his grizzled head, his long, straggly silver locks swaying. "I'm sure I didn't see it, though not sure it ain't here. Sprite, we got to get something more'n a hoss's track afore we will get any place."

"And what, what shall we do?" She was hopeless, dismayed.

The restaurant man was at their table and to him Beaver said, "Couple of square meals, Charlie, and bring us a pad of paper, envelopes and stamps."

These articles having been provided, the old scout smiled brightly at the troubled girl. "I can hardly print my own name, so you write a letter. I'll tell you what to say."

"Ready," said Dora, pencil poised, and Beaver dictated:

"Lanky Hank, Liveryman, Elkhart. You happen to know a fellow that I got reason to think was in your neck of the woods around a month ago, or less, who has him a humdinging good bay saddle hoss—a trick hoss that'll lie down flat when his rider tells him to?

"I suspect this man knowed Keno Kate pretty well. It's important as all get-out that I get a line on him and his hoss. But keep your trap shut about it, and let me have your answer pronto.

Yours,
Beaver Long Bow."

Their food arrived and they ate in silence, having the small restaurant almost entirely to themselves, until most unexpectedly Ralph Mortimer swaggered in.

"Well, well, I missed you at the sheep camp, Miss Dora," he began almost genially. "Now I find you hob-nobbin' with our famous tracker, woodsman, hunter, scout," heavy sarcasm in his booming voice, "when you might have loped to town with me. Eaten with me, too."

Beaver Long Bow turned slightly in his chair, calling to the restaurant owner: "Ho, Charlie, you left the door open and somethin' come in that smells rotten."

Although Mortimer's face and neck darkened with the hue of rage, he ignored both the insult and old Beaver. Turning his shoulder to the man and looking directly at the girl, he resumed:

"Saw one of Axel Pierce's posse, prowlin' 'round in the hills, and so heard of the fresh mystery at Circle C. Sure was sorry to learn Joe McDermott had gone on the dodge and me aimin' to close a deal with him this mornin'."

Not knowing what to say to this arrogant man, Dora hoped Beaver would make the move to leave the restaurant.

"I just now dropped in to see Ira Pickett," Mortimer was going on. "Gosh! He's got his neck bowed like an old bull. I never thought the yellow-bellied cow thief had that much spunk. I says to him, 'Pickett, 'twon't be but a few days till I own the Circle C. Then this neck of the woods won't be near big enough for you and me both.'

"He squealed at me, 'I know that, damn you!' Imagine him cussin' me! 'Glad you realize it,' says I. 'How much for your tumbledown ranch and your herd of scrubby mavericks?'

"Pickett yowls, 'You, you beat me to that lease on the grazin' land, but I'll see you in hell afore I'll sell to you!' "

Dora glanced desperately at Beaver, her eyes telling him she wanted to get away. But the old tracker had fished out a vile pipe, loaded it and was calmly puffing as if he rather enjoyed this meeting with the owner of the Flying H.

Mortimer was still talking, "So I said, 'Oh, yeah?' scornful. Then I let him have it right atween his horns. 'Pickett, I've laid off you long enough!' And I made no bones about tellin' him the only reason I had laid off was

'cause it tickled me to have him rilin' up Clay McDermott, swipin' Circle C calves and Circle C water, aggravatin' Clay no end.

"'But when I own the Circle C that crooked business stops,' says I. 'You'll sell to me at my price or I'll put you in the pen. I can dig up evidence to do it, too.' Proddy or not, he'll be seein' things my way all right."

"You seem real sure of that," drawled Beaver.

Mortimer swung about to face the old scout. "Rumor says you're McDermott's friend," he said. "Rumor says you'll be the only man who'll be seein' him till after all this smoke and fire about a murder charge agin him has blown over. So when you see McDermott, Beaver, tell him to jog to the Flying H after night and I'll pay him for his layout, sign the necessary papers. Then he can vamoose."

"I'll put him wise," said Beaver, but Dora, suddenly enraged beyond restraint, flared:

"Ralph Mortimer, you think you're dealing with Joe McDermott, weak, wishy-washy coward. But you're not! You've still got Clay to deal with and he'll fight you till—"

"Clay?" Mortimer's body had gone rigid. His black eyes pierced the girl. "Clay?" he iterated. "You mean—?"

"I mean it was Joe who died and Clay who's alive. Alive!"

Slowly the big ranchman relaxed. He turned again to Beaver, asking, "Is she goofy, trapper?"

Beaver grinned. "You don't seem nowise so sure you can deal with Clay as you did that you could deal with Joe," he drawled.

"That ain't the point," barked Mortimer. "How can Clay McDermott be alive when—" Suddenly he smacked his right hand against the palm of his left and voiced an oath. "I begin to see it! 'Twas proved that Joe was there at Circle C the night of the murder, so he's been accused of it. But the straight of the ugly mixup is that Clay up and shot Joe; then high-tailed. Well the sonovagun had me fooled!"

At this point two men came in and sat down at a near-by table. Mortimer scowled at them in annoyance and old Beaver slowly lifted himself erect. "We'll amble, sprite."

However, as the frontiersman walked forward to pay the check the Flying H rancher spoke in an undertone to the girl: "I'm asking you to ride home with me."

She said very bluntly and very distinctly, "No."

Blood rushed to the man's dark face. Black eyes snapping, he caught her forearm. "Better think it over and change your mind, Miss. Remember, I can spill an earful to that savage old dad of yours and will he go gunning for that damned McDermott!"

The girl was white and still. Her haunted eyes saw old Beaver slouching toward them. She heard his soft words, "Go ahead and spill your earful to Beckworth, you damned skunk!"

Instantly Mortimer released Dora's arm, to slap his hand on the butt of his low-slung gun, but he did not draw the weapon. Only four feet distant Beaver Long Bow stood facing him. The two men's wills clashed; their eyes clashed. Thus for a breathless moment, with two witnesses besides Dora as motionless as frozen images, the tension held. Then Mortimer's gaze shifted. Lifting his hand from his gun, he strode quickly through the door and vanished.

Beaver took the girl by the hand and led her outside. Behind them a man gasped and his companion cried hoarsely, "Beaver, Mortimer'll kill you for that!"

Beaver did not answer, nor even glance back; but Dora shivered, clinging to his hand. Presently she was aware that they had reached the post office.

"Mail for the Circle C?" inquired Beaver of buxom, inquisitive Mrs. Darrow.

"Should I give it to you?" she asked. "I guess it's all right. This time there's

a letter that must be from Joe McDermott's flame. Also—"

"Here's a letter for your outgoin' mail," Beaver interrupted. "You hear about them X-ray cameras they got now? Take pictures of your bones right through your flesh. You had ought to have one of them that'd work on paper."

The postmistress drew herself up in the manner of a ruffled hen. "Why, the idea of you insinuating that—Here's the Circle C mail. Who in the world did Clay McDermott know in Arizona? Of all things! Mister Beaver Long Bow, it's against the law to open another man's letters. If I was to report this you'd go to jail. . . . What's the Elkhart woman say?"

"That she hopes all gossips get the lockjaw," said old Beaver. However, he wasn't getting this information from the letter which he and Dora was scanning.

"Joe:

"I won't ever bother you or see you again. Barfly Webb tried to shake me down. I slapped his mouth. The little squealer may try and sell you what he thinks he knows. Don't believe a word of it. I *did not* hire that man to shoot your brother. Barfly's yarn's a lie. You just got to believe me.

K. K."

"Which clears up nothin', settles nothin'," said the scout to Dora. "Maybe she's lyin' and maybe she ain't. Envelope's postmarked 'Elkhart' so it helps none a-tall to show where Keno's gone."

"Gossips! Lockjaw!" gasped Mrs. Darrow. "I agree with her. Only yesterday I was saying—Who's lying, Beaver? Is it from Keno Kate?"

Dora was reading the second letter which Beaver had summarily opened—the letter to Clay McDermott with an Arizona postmark.

"Dear Clay:

I don't think I done you no dirt yet something is hurtin me til I got to get it off my chest. Up on the flat outa sight of yore house I seen Ira Pickett prowling along his ditch to open his hedgate I bet. Him and me chaw the fat some, me maybe grouching bout bein sent to town when I aint no jack to get drunk on, only fifty cents.

Prety soon he learn bout the letter, then he sed a man like me ort not to stand for the way Clay drove his hired help. I sed I knowed it and would quit like a steer in the road and go to Arizony if I had the dough.

Lot more talk and finally Pickett staked me to go to Arizony and more too than just a stake. I could leave him the letter to mail this saving me time in Long Bow where I just only had time to turn my hoss, which is yore Circle C hoss, on the range.

All of which I done, not buying a ticket but paying atter I was in the smoking car. Fer some goofy reason Pickett didn't want me to be seen. I bin wonderin if he had some hombre ridin herd on me. Seen a feller watching me and trailing me too. Dunno who. Course that dont matter and course Pickett mailed yore letter so thats all jake. Now I told you how come I quitted you suddent I hope you aint got no hard feelins.

Yores,

Quicker'n Scat."

"Who's that one from?" inquired the ubiquitous Mrs. Darrow, who had been doing her best to see the writing.

"From Six-Shooter Kirk, a bandit pal of McDermott's," informed Beaver gravely. "Wants him to lope down to Arizona and settle an argument."

"A bandit pal? Settle an argument?"

"Uh-huh." Beaver stowed the letters in his hip pocket. "Seems this Six-Shooter Kirk has got a red hot argument on which is the most curious, a cub bear, an antelope, a skim-milk colt or the postmistress of Long Bow."

When Dora and her companion were again on the street, the girl said, "Does Scat's letter help us any, Beaver?"

The scout was scowling at Scat's mes-

sage. "Some queer human critters in this world, sprite," he remarked, a contemptuous twist to his lips. "This miserable cross atween a jack-rabbit and a coyote for example. Yet he finally realized he'd done somethin' mean and sneakin' or he wouldn't have written to Clay. For which we can be 'bliged to him."

"Then it does help. I know it shows how Pickett was the man who stopped Clay's letter to the land office. Therefore Pickett is really the one who stole the leased land and with Mortimer taking it right out from under Pickett's nose, no wonder Pickett is fuming."

Beaver nodded. "Howsoever, this point is more interestin' to us," placing his forefinger on one line of the letter. "Somebody here in town was powerful interested in watching Quicker'n Scat take the train. I figger it was the hired killer or the man who'd hired him. When whoever 'twas saw Scat flaggin' his kite he was sure Clay McDermott'd be alone on the Circle C; sure the time to act had come."

"That's reasonable, Beaver. Isn't it also reasonable, in view of what we've learned today, that the murderer may still be hiding right here in Long Bow?"

"Uh-huh." The frontiersman pocketed both letters and slapped his leg with sudden decision. "Blister my moccasins, I should 'a' thought of this sooner. Li'l' girl, if I had hired a drygulcher to get a certain man for me and then all of a sudden I found out my bushwhacker had dropped the wrong man, what I would I do?"

Dora's eyes were dancing once again. "You'd look up your hired assassin to bawl him out and—"

"And set him on the trail of the man I really wanted outa my way!" clicked the scout. "Let's be doin' things. I don't dast to shadow Mortimer myself, for he'd suspect me. I'll get Walt Winslow, the old saddle-maker, to tag Mister Mortimer. Walt used to be an army scout, same as me. I can bank on him.

"I'll get somebody else to break the news to Slick Card Corson that Clay's still alive and ride herd on Slick Card, too. We mustn't pass up no leads. I'll also drop around to the bank and talk to Raymond Edmonds."

"Why talk to the banker, Beaver?"

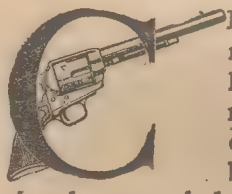
"It takes dough to hire a bushwhacker, sprite, a heap more'n just the triflin' Pickett gave Quicker'n Scat. We may get a real lead from Edmonds. Uh-huh. Should 'a' thought of it sooner. Quick as we get these details attended to, all as secret like as possible, you and me'll jog to the sheep camp where we'll rope L. G. Beckworth in to help us."

"Get L. G. to help us!" gasped Dora, her thoughts whirling once again. She had temporarily forgotten that her own father was so very likely to be the man who had hired a murderer.

"Sure," returned Beaver and if he noticed her confusion he gave no sign. "I'll have L. G. break the news of Clay's being alive to the sneakin' little cur, Pickett, and then keep tabs on Pickett to see what he does tonight. Finally, after we get these other things 'tended to and after dark, I'll mosy to the Flyin' H to see what I can see."

CHAPTER XIII

The Trained Horse



CLAY McDERMOTT, riding in that brushy land of grotesque rock formations, cliffs, blind chasms, bald ridges and occasional open glades known as Painted Brakes, had spent a restless forenoon.

More by chance than by intention, his wanderings finally brought him to Dora's cave, where twice in the never-to-be-forgotten days which now seemed long ago he had found her.

He swung off and went into the cave, discovering, to his amazement, camp supplies and blankets. A moment's search revealed tracks of the girl's small, high-heeled boots; other signs

indicated that she had spent one night in the cavern.

Wondering about this—for surely Dora's mother and her father would not have allowed her to stay in this remote and lonely spot alone—Clay built a tiny fire of dry sticks that scarcely smoked at all, made coffee and camp bread, and fried bacon.

He had intended to go to Beaver's cabin to get what food he needed. But this he had neglected until it was now too late. By this time—it was almost noon—Deputy Sheriff Pierce would have a man or two posted near the old scout's home. Trust the zealous young deputy to do everything possible toward capturing the man he believed to be Joe McDermott and a murderer.

But did Pierce know of Dora's cave? Clay doubted it. For the present, therefore, the man felt safe and the blankets spread over springy pine bows looked most inviting to Clay McDermott, suddenly aware of his great weariness. Loss of sleep, hard riding, the buffetings of fate and mental torture were at last taking their toll.

Finishing his meal, he hid his horse in a jumble of scrub oak bushes, returned to the cave, pulled off his boots, laid his rifle beside him and, right hand on his six-shooter, stretched out on the blankets.

The afternoon shadows were long when Clay McDermott awakened to the flare of a match in his eyes; to the touch of cold steel against his forehead. Immediately he recognized Coyote Jack, fishy-eyed, bewhiskered and unkempt, holding the match in one hand, a gun in the other. Tom Roberts, the Long Bow blacksmith, now a posseman, stood in the background with Clay's rifle and Clay's Colt in his left hand, a cocked six-shooter in his right; Deputy Sheriff Axel Pierce held his weapon against the cowman's head.

"Now you see how 'tis, you can set up," said Pierce. "Meet Coyote Jack. He's the tracker who ran you down. Good as Beaver Long Bow, Coyote is. Damn old Beaver! He shore put one over on me. But I'm even now."

"You seem to be right well pleased, Axel," Clay returned, sitting up against the rock wall. "What you aim to do with me?"

Coyote's match had at last burned out, and the cave instantly became as dark as night.

"Take you to town, of course. Stand up!"

Clay pulled on his boots, but did not rise. "Pierce, you don't dare take me to Long Bow. Jim Hadley and you couldn't hold them ringy citizens off the man they now think killed Clay McDermott. Beaver was dead right about what'd happen to me, and you know it."

"Again, get up. Of course you'll be safe in jail."

The second match flickered out. Coyote was reaching for another as Clay drawled, "'Fraid your protection wouldn't be near strong enough, Pierce."

Then, as though a hidden spring had shot him upward, he was on his feet—a human cyclone. A terrific blow to the deputy's chin picked him up and laid him flat. In the next split second Clay's right fist, with all the weight of his supple body behind it, drove to Coyote Jack's nose.

Two down and then Clay McDermott sailed out through the cave's mouth on into the sheltering brush, up through this in the dim light to get his horse. Too late to rectify the mistake, he discovered the men had found and moved the animal. From cover, he saw them in their saddles a few minutes later, Coyote leading Clay's horse, the three of them spreading out to try to run down the fugitive, and how Axel Pierce was swearing!

"Proddy as a badger you've kicked end over end and headed off from his hole," mused Clay. "Good enough egg, Pierce, only he's kinda know-it-all and foolish. Foolish, or he'd have listened to old Beaver instead of being so darned sure Joe McDermott was a killer."

On foot, and in the maze of brush, the cowman held a decided advantage over the man-hunters, particularly as the twilight was rapidly fading to darkness. The three were moving up country and when Clay believed they were at a safe distance, he hurried back to Dora's cave. To his disappointment he found the men had taken all weapons with them. He again took to the brush, and was stealing toward a small, open area when he saw something which caused him to stiffen in his tracks, rock-still.

On the farther side of this clearing, only dimly seen by the cowman in the fading light, a horseman had halted, obviously listening to the rustling of branches and the muffled tread of horses sounding from up country.

"Another posseman," Clay thought.

In another moment the cowman changed his mind, for as the noise made by the man-hunters became more distinct, the fellow quickly dismounted and spoke in an understone to his horse —a dark bay horse. Clay could not be sure, but it looked to him as if the man also gently tapped the animal's front legs.

The horse responded by lying down, swiftly and silently. The man crouched beside his prone mount and both were effectively hidden by the scrubby brush.

Soon, Axel Pierce, Tom Roberts and Coyote Jack rode into the clearing, and continued down across it without seeing either Clay or the other man beside his trained mount. The voices of the trackers came back to the cowman.

"Not a bit of use us prowlin' 'round here in the dark," Pierce was saying.

"None a-tall," agreed Coyote. "Tomorrow we'll hit his trail and I'll whang a bullet through him. Busted my smeller, the——!"

"They say this Joe McDermott's a wash-out, lazy, slow, shiftless," commented Roberts with a dry chuckle. "But, golly, he's terrific. Afore I knowed it, he'd moved and Pierce was doin' a backwards flip-flop and Coyote was tryin' to knock the side outa the cave with his head and shoulders, while McDermott was goin' through the door like a bullet. Sure glad he didn't land on me!"

Pierce growled, "Wish we had a camp outfit. Since we ain't we'll put up at Circle C, by gosh! I'll have that tough hombre behind the bars yet."

Branches rustled as they passed on out of hearing, and in the darkness, which had increased ten-fold, Clay began to circle around the open area. He'd approach the mysterious stranger with the trained horse and. . . .

Again the brush was rustling. The cowman heard the chud of hoofs, saw the dark shapes of the rider and his horse leaving the vicinity. Clay thought of calling to the man and stifled the thought. Obviously the rider of the trained horse had not wished to be seen. This was a haven for lone riders, outside the law. Therefore an answer to a friendly hail was very likely to come in the shape of a bullet. All sounds had ceased and the Painted Brakes had again become as silent as the playground of ghosts.

CHAPTER XIV

Rendezvous at Split Rock

SPLIT ROCK, the rendezvous where the cowman was to meet Beaver Long Bow, was a needle-like granite pinnacle. Ripped and slashed by lightning, it lifted its spire high above other rock formations in its immediate vicinity. At its base lay a small glen with a spring of sweet, clear water; and here Clay McDermott quenched his thirst after the most difficult, hazardous journey he had ever been forced to make.

Movement by daylight and on horseback in the trackless wilderness of Painted Brakes was bad enough. On foot and by night it was almost impossible. Nevertheless Clay had arrived at the rendezvous, and though it was not yet midnight, he could hear a horse picking its way through the

jungle. Moving out of the little glen into the darkest shadow at the base of the huge rock, he crouched, scarcely breathing. Before showing himself Clay would be very sure the rider was Beaver.

Suddenly a joyous exclamation of sheer amazement escaped his lips, for little Dora Beckworth, on Red Eagle, had ridden into the open area. How small and elfin-like she looked astride the tall horse. How pretty her figure; how lovely her face, shadowed now by her floppy old hat!

"You!" called McDermott, running toward her.

Controlling her fidgety horse—Red Eagle still found Painted Brakes a very spooky place—the girl breathed one word: "Clay!" And then he had lifted her from her saddle; his arms held her while she nestled yet closer to him.

Neither spoke again until presently the man whispered, "Sweetheart, you called me 'Clay.' You've known it all the time?"

"No. I thought it must be, yet I knew it couldn't be. Oh, it was all so mixed up. But it's all right now, Clay, I love you, love you, love you! It was a nightmare when I thought I'd lost you. But I haven't!"

He kissed her and she clung to him with a sort of delirious ecstasy; the man, but little less moved, whispered that he loved her. Forgetful of all his problems he held her until at last those problems came swarming back. He tied Red Eagle, led the girl to a large, flat rock and seated himself beside her, saying:

"This one little hour is ours and nobody can ever take it from us. But we're in the woods, with no trail out, unless— You must have seen Beaver or you wouldn't have known where to find me. Why didn't the good old scout come himself?"

Dora looked at him, starry eyed. "Oh, I have so much to tell you. First what Beaver and I did and what we learned today."

It was a long story, and Dora omitted no details which might have any connection with the mystery. When she told about their discovery of how the man who had hidden his trail in Pickett's ditch had induced his bay horse to lie down in the heavy sage to escape being seen by Axel Pierce and his posse, Clay abruptly bounded to his feet. However he did not tell her that at dark this evening he had been within fifty yards of that trained bay horse. Therefore—within fifty yards of the assassin! And he had not known it! When he spoke it was quietly:

"That's something we can get our teeth into. Find the horse and—" He broke off, thinking, "I'll be on his trail at crack of dawn, but I won't alarm Dora by telling her."

The girl mentioned the meeting with Mortimer, the letters from Quicker'n Scat and Keno Kate which Beaver had passed on to her to give to Clay. She told how the old scout had got a man to watch Slick Card Corson; had put Walt Winslow on Mortimer's trail and why these things had been done.

"Beaver also visited Raymond Edmonds at the bank," said Dora. "Yet I do not know what he learned there, if anything. We finally left Long Bow and although I didn't like the idea at all—" her voice caught in her throat.

Clay, once more seated beside the girl he loved, felt her hand tremble on his arm. In a moment she'd controlled her emotions, resuming:

"This is what I didn't like. Beaver told my father you were alive and he asked L. G. Beckworth to tell this surprise news to Ira Pickett. After doing so, L. G. was going to ride close herd on the Pick ranch, shadowing Ira Pickett. . . . Clay! What are you grinning about? You must know I'm scared to death my father himself is—is a suspect. There's nothing funny in—"

"Just thinking how disgruntled Mister Pickett must have been to learn his secret was out. It'll be no news to him that I'm really Clay McDermott.

He's known it all along; tried to force me to give him my outfit as the price for keeping his lips buttoned."

"For goodness sake!" said the girl. "Pickett's known all along! I expect that is the 'something' he told me 'would rock the county to its foundations.' What a blow to him to find his ace in the hole is only a deuce. But at that, it may decide him to try to get rid of you. I came here tonight, darling, to warn you to be on guard not only against Axel Pierce and his posse, but against a possible drygulcher."

"Wasn't hardly necessary to warn me about Axel Pierce," commented Clay with a reminiscent chuckle. Briefly he told the girl of his experience at her cave, concluding, "Darn 'em, they set me afoot."

"But you got away, that's the main thing," said Dora.

It did not seem to occur to her that he must have been disarmed, and although Clay needed a gun and a horse, he did not ask the girl for her weapon or her mount. Her need of a pistol might be even greater than his and she certainly could not walk home through this wilderness of brush. Another thought struck him.

"Sunbeam, I can now see why Beaver couldn't meet me. Yet you shouldn't have come to this dangerous country alone at night. Not but what I'm the happiest man in the world over seeing you and thinking you'd do so much for me. Yet—Well, you might have brought one of the sheepherders, José or Sanchez with you."

Dora's laugh trilled forth. "Get either of those Mexicans into this country after night! Not on your life. Not even in the daylight. They say it's haunted."

Clay laughed too. "I'd forgotten how superstitious and scary they are. Which reminds me there have been a good many times when I was tempted to spook José and Sanchez and leave L. G. without any sheepherders. But I never did."

"No. You always played fair," said Dora. "Clay dear, I hate to leave you. I'd heaps rather stay with you, but L. G. insisted I must come home as soon as I delivered my message. And with him acting more human I don't want to cross him again right away."

"What's this?" McDermott was amazed. "L. G. acting more human! And he allowed you to meet me tonight!"

"Yes. He hated the idea. But there was no one else to send. Clay, lover, I haven't told you everything. I never dared to ask Beaver if he suspected my father. Yet it's evident that he doesn't. This evening Beaver waded into L. G. rough shod; gave him a blistering tongue-lashing."

"And Beckworth took it?"

"Took it on the chin as the cowboys would say, and swallowed it. Beaver told him what a nasty, ornery, contemptible brute he was, ordered him to snap out of it and help see that your name was cleared."

"And Beaver performed a miracle?" Clay inquired incredulously.

"Nothing less! L. G. isn't the same brooding, sour, at-outs-with-the-world man he was. What's more he's now eager to get the mystery cleared up and see justice done. That's why he consented to my coming here tonight."

"It's too good to be true," ejaculated Clay.

"I want to believe it's true and I'm afraid to," returned the girl, snuggling closer to the cowman. "However, here's the way Beaver got under L. G.'s skin, on the justice proposition. After they'd had their showdown, old Beaver said meaningly, 'Unless we clear McDermott he'll go over the road on circumstantial evidence. You know what circumstantial evidence can do to a man.' Father's face went hard and bitter and he gritted, 'Don't I! None better. I see you know all about the old charge against me, Beaver.'

"Beaver nodded and then said, 'You'll think I'm pretty nosy, Beckworth; but I dug up your record.'

"My father cried, 'Since you've

looked into that long-ago business, can't you clear me of that old charge?'

"Beaver said he couldn't, because by the time he took up the trail, it was stone cold. Although he tried, he didn't uncover any new clues or facts. But Beaver personally is satisfied my father was innocent. Imagine what a load that lifted from L. G.'s mind and Mother's and mine."

"Dora, honey, that's great news!" Clay said. "I'm so glad for you. For him. Isn't old Beaver a brick? But why'd he interest himself in that old, dead and buried case, since L. G. had already paid the penalty?"

"Dear, he told me why. It was because he loved me and loved you. Right from the first he saw that we—well, that we were meant for each other. To take a weight off of Mother's mind and mine and to help you and Father, too, was why he took up that cold trail."

Then as they both rose to their feet, Dora threw her arms around his neck, almost sobbing: "Oh, will things come out right?"

Clay assured her confidently: "With you and Beaver pulling for me I know it will come out right." He didn't know anything of the kind, but if he could get the man who rode a trained bay horse; get him alive. . . .

"I hope you can send Beaver to meet me tomorrow night," he continued. "Tell him I want powerful much to see him."

"Perhaps I can come with him," she returned. "If nothing happens in the meantime."

Leading Red Eagle they walked slowly down country together, fighting their way through the brush and over the rocks, whispering to one another as lovers will, until they reached the edge of the Brakes. Here the cowman tenderly lifted Dora to her saddle, and with a last admonition to him to be careful since he meant so much to her, she was gone on her return journey, across that vast open starlight range country of Porcupine Flats.

Clay listened until all sound of Red Eagle's hoof beats had ceased; then rumpled his hair with his right hand, meditating upon all she had told him. She had met him this night *with Beckworth's consent!* This no more amazing than that Beaver's lambasting of Beckworth had wrought a marvelous change. Was it possible that the sheepman was now allied with Beaver to clear up the mystery? To clear Clay McDermott's name? Though he wanted to believe this, Clay simply could not.

Since nothing could be done in the darkness toward trailing the man with the trained horse, the cowman crawled deep into a thicket where rustle of leaves and branches would be sure to betray any approaching enemy, and lay down, determined that he must sleep. However, with his brain on fire, every nerve tingling with excitement and anticipation, his rest was fitful, nightmarish.

The gray light of dawn at last! Clay returned to the spot where he'd seen the mysterious rider and picked up the trail. Immediately he realized that the man had been riding about in seemingly aimless fashion as if seeking somebody in these hills. Seeking whom? McDermott needed only one guess. The killer was seeking him! An icy chill ran down his back as he recalled that he had no gun, recalled the deadly accuracy with which this killer had shot his brother and also Barfly Webb.

Soon the cowman discovered where the horse had been picketed for the night in a small, open glade. Apparently the man himself had sat all the night through with his back against a big tree, a rifle across his knees, taking no chances of being caught napping.

Every nerve tense, eager eyes darting glances here, there, everywhere, Clay followed the fresh tracks, made less than half an hour ago. He moved with the stealth of an Indian stalking a deer, yet, for all his watchfulness, the first inkling he had of the killer's presence was a screaming rifle bullet ripping through his hat and clipping hairs from his scalp.

CHAPTER XV

Hired Killer

S THE staccato crack of the rifle rang in his ears, Clay acted. Doing everything in his power to imitate the fall of a man mortally hit by a bullet, he dropped behind a large rock entirely surrounded by brush.

Peering through this underbrush, the cowman saw a puff of smoke lifting from a spot some fifty yards distant. Neither the marksman nor his horse was in sight. But surely the fellow would come to assure himself he had got his man.

Thankful that the rock had been so convenient, and that a heavy growth of brush now offered him concealment, Clay, worming along like a snake, changed his hiding place. Some three or four yards from the rock, he stopped and waited; waited so long he gave over all hope of the man's coming.

"Doggone! I'll have to hit his trail again. And without a gun!"

So thinking, Clay had started to rise, when a faint sound reached his ears, the scrape of clothing against leaves and branches. The man had circled around to approach the rock from the rear. An inch at a time he was stealing forward. He had discarded his rifle, but in his right hand was a cocked six-shooter; another was holstered at his left hip. Suddenly a low but chagrined oath escaped him as he stared in a dumbfounded manner at the spot where should have been a corpse—and there was none!

Seeing the fellow now at close range, Clay, to his own amazement, recognized him—James Gould, a bartender at the Antlers' Saloon in Long Bow. However, only once had the cowman met this stocky, active man with the square-jawed, red face, meaty nose, thick cruel lips and wicked slate-gray eyes, who was a comparative newcomer to Long Bow.

Biding his time until Gould, the killer, after scrutinizing the ground most intently, had turned his back, Clay McDermott sprang forward with all the ferocity of a panther. The man whirled; his Colt .45 flamed in Clay's face, almost blinding him. But the bullet hummed into space, and a human projectile smashed the gunman to earth.

One thought only hammered in Clay's mind. He must not lose his temporary advantage. Swift as light he vised the other's gun wrist, and with his adversary writhing like a snake, he maneuvered for the hammer-lock hold, and got it. As he savagely twisted Gould's arm, cold sweat broke out on the fellow's coarse face.

"Let up!" he screamed. "I'll quit." The gun fell from his nerveless fingers.

"I ought to break your damn neck!" panted Clay.

Instead, he released his hold, jerked one Colt from the man's holster, snatched up the other one from the ground, and leaped back. A feeling of exultation possessed him. He had caught the assassin. The end of the trail was in sight!

"Sit against that rock," he commanded, "and answer some questions. *Muy pronto.*"

To the cowman's surprise Gould answered: "S'posin' I admit doin' both jobs on the Circle C, what then? You know damned well I ain't the jasper higher up, back of the deal."

"Right, Mister Gould, which ain't your real name, of course. Perhaps I know who hired you. That Elkhart tie-up seems plain enough, since you now admit you shot Barfly Webb. Why didn't you drop me at the same time, 'stead of following me into these Brakes to do the job?"

The man's sullen, wolfish expression changed. He grinned tantalizingly at the grim-faced cowman. It was as if, although caught, he had no fear of what Clay McDermott might do with him; as if he held a trump card.

"It occur to you how my boss might not 'a' wanted you shot night afore

last and then somethin' come up later to change his mind?"

"I savvy," said Clay. "So long as this higher-up thought I was harmless Joe McDermott he'd let me go on livin'. He found out I was Clay, so—"

"Only partly right, feller."

"Keep talkin'. Talk or I'll blow your brains out, you killer."

"Sure I'm a killer. Trigger Gault, professional killer, and proud of it. This latest job of mine really began in Elkhart, some three weeks ago. Skippin' details, me and Keno Kate got chummy enough so I up and asked her what the hell was her idea in holdin' onto a down-and-outer like Joe McDermott.

"We was in the back part of Averill Moorehouse's eatin' joint that evenin', and she says, 'I'm playin' this fool Joe McDermott for a meal ticket in my old age. He'll get the Circle C ranch when his brother kicks off.'

"Says I, 'You may wait a heck of a long time.' She'd thought of that, was gettin' desperate. We cooked up a scheme—me to get a thousand bucks for feedin' Clay McDermott a dose of lead poison."

The cowman stood like a statue, only his eyes moving. This was as he had feared. This was what Barfly Webb would have told him.

Trigger Gault licked his thick lips and resumed: "Just afore me and Keno got up to go I heard somethin'. I jumped to the back door but nobody was in sight. Yet I suspected that louse, Barfly Webb. He'd been sneakin' 'round, kinda keepin' tabs on me and Keno.

"We-el, whatever that little noise was, it scairt the woman stiff, or maybe she'd got cold feet, thinkin' about the job. Anyhow she told me the deal was all off. . . . I rid out that night, ain't seen her since. She ain't none to blame."

Clay's breath rushed out with a hissing sound. "But Joe was shot and you did it!"

"Uh-huh," nonchalantly. Trigger was certainly cold blooded. "In Long Bow I got me a job tendin' bar daytimes, so as to have my nights free, and—"

"Where'd you hide your horse?"

The killer grinned. "Rented me a two-room shack on the edge of town, kinda off to itself. Stole hay and grain fer my bronc. Exercised him in the dark, too. . . ."

"Go on with the details," Clay said, prodding the gun into Trigger Gault's hide.

"Well, the day Barfly come by train to Long Bow I seen him but he didn't see me. What was that skulkin' little cuss doin' in Long Bow? When I seen him hirin' a livery stable hoss, heard him askin' the way to Circle C, somethin' clicked in my head.

"I was at Circle C afore he got there. I let him gab enough to make sure he aimed to name Keno and me, then shut him up permanent. And that's the truth 'bout the Elkhart tie-up."

So plausible did this sound that Clay found himself believing the man. He had never liked the idea of guilt pointing to any woman, and felt relieved that this hard-boiled killer had given Keno Kate a clean slate.

"So much for so much," the cowman said. "Yet, in spite of Keno's telling you to lay off, you did shoot my brother believing he was me. Why? Who hired you?"

"You really want to know?"

"Yes. But if you ain't minded to talk, I'll just as soon let daylight in you. Better yet, I'll take you to town. I've got enough on you to—"

"No! You won't take me to Long Bow, nor turn me over to the sheriff, nor lock me up."

"Like hell I won't!"

"You'll change your tune in a jiffy. Here's why: As bartender in Long Bow I could ask questions, and I right soon larnt three different men would like to see a bad accident happen to Clay McDermott. So, I figgered, here's where I make me a stake."

"Anybody ever tell you you're lower

than a snake in a wagon track?" Clay blazed out at the man.

Entirely unruffled and unmoved, the fellow shrugged, going on, "I sized up your neighbors, when I saw 'em at different times in the Antlers Saloon, decided which one would be my best bet and hit him for a job. And by thunder, he'd been hopin' he could find a man like me."

"Name him," ordered the cowman hoarsely.

Trigger Gault grinned crookedly. "So 'twas arranged and the job was done. Howsoever, yesterday this same jasper came to me again, and was he spittin' brimstone! He'd larnt I made a hell of a mistake. The man he had wanted kilt was still alive, and he suspected stronger'n strong his daughter knowed it. Anyhow, he said he had caught the girl at Circle C where she'd cooked supper for Clay McDermott and—"

White-lipped, the cowman was staring fixedly at the killer. "What're you saying?" he demanded in a choked voice.

"Just tellin' the blunt truth. You said a while back 'twas funny I didn't drop you same time I shot Barfly Webb. Now you see I didn't get my orders to get you till yesterday."

Clay was suddenly dripping sweat; cold sweat. He started to ask a question, but no intelligible sound passed his lips.

Trigger Gault leered at him, vindictively triumphant. "Take me to town and I'll spill all I know, admit killin' Joe McDermott, thinkin' 'twas you, and name the man who hired me. How'd you like to see the *father of your sweetheart hung for murder?*"

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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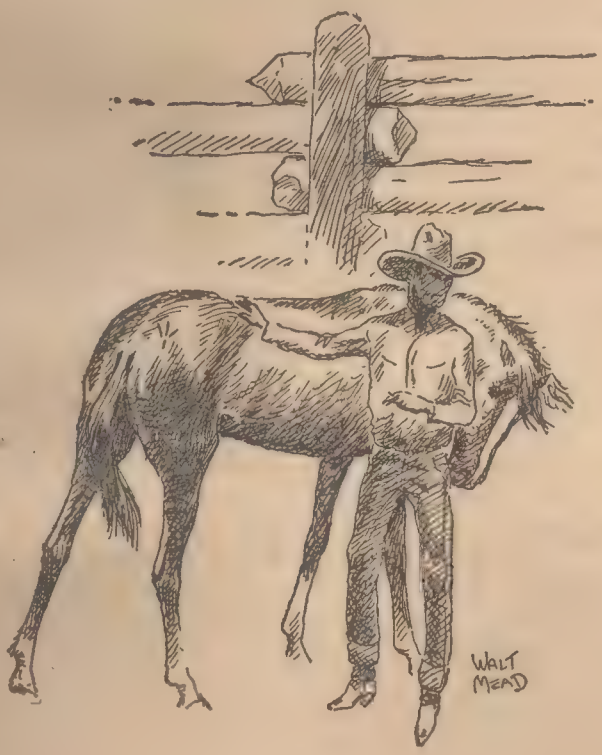
LISTERINE SHAVING CREAM

The Wrangler's Page

By Walt Mead

Good Company

HORSES are mighty fine company if you will only try to understand them. They appreciate kind words and a gentle hand. Never lose your temper with a nervous or impatient horse. Perhaps the fellow who owned him before you was anything but kind. Horses are very sensitive. They are also appreciative of kindness and thoughtfulness and they remember their masters.



An Indian gave me a pony one time that had dragged a man to his death. That horse couldn't stand the smell of any man and he was worse than some green bronc that you'd run in off the range. If he hadn't been such a good horse, I'd never have wasted so much time on him.

Two months later he was trailing me around the corral, pulling the gloves out of my hip pocket. Sure, he was looking for sugar, but it wasn't sugar that had won his confidence in the first place, but a heap of patience and a gentle hand.

Horses, like humans or dogs, get very lonely. They appreciate a friendly pat as well as an apple. It is no mere myth that cowboys, alone on the range, talk to their horses, and every horse knows his owner's voice.

There's only one horse you can't tame, and that's an outlaw. If you have one, look up some rodeo manager. He'll pay you well for a good bucking horse because there are not a great many of them. There is nothing in the world that will take the fight out of a natural bucking horse. The outlaw blood is too strong in him.

On the other hand, most horses can be gentled by kindliness, and there's no better company, no truer pal.

RANCH ROMANCES' amateur page

Editor's Note:—This page is made up from contributions of readers. On it we shall publish original pieces of prose or verse or cartoons. The only requirements are that the persons submitting material be amateurs, and that the contributions be such as will appeal to people interested in the West and in Western stories. For each contribution published we will send the writer (or artist, if it is a cartoon) two dollars. Each person may submit more than one contribution.

Address all contributions to RANCH ROMANCES' Amateur Page, 515 Madison Avenue, New York City. All submissions will be considered. No submissions will be returned, nor can we enter into correspondence about your contributions. Remember—and this is important—all material must be original with the person submitting it, and not copied from anything else.

Rainy Afternoon

I've ridden on the mesa when
The snow fell thick and fast,
When an icy wind was whipping
At the cows that drifted past.
I've herded steers in summertime,
With the purple sage in bloom,
But I loved best the bunkhouse
On a rainy afternoon.

There was Slim and Tex and Curly,
Playing poker by the door,
There were chaps and boots and Stetsons
Sort of scattered 'cross the floor,
There was a drowsy murmur as
The rain droned out a tune,
Oh, 'twas heaven in the bunkhouse,
On a rainy afternoon.

We might ride line tomorrow,
Just as yesterday,
Or Slim or Tex or Curly might
Go riding on his way.
We might break broncs beneath the sun,
Or night-watch 'neath the moon,
But the present was the bunkhouse,
On a rainy afternoon.

We just lazed 'round all morning,
Just a-waitin' for the gong;
Listenin' to the raindrops sing
A sort of mournful song.
Livin' in the present,
Tomorrow'd come too soon;
Just loafin' in the bunkhouse,
On a rainy afternoon.

Yes, I've ridden on the mesa when
The snow fell thick and fast,
When an icy wind was whipping at
The cows that drifted past.
I've herded cows in summertime
With the purple sage in bloom,
But I loved best the bunkhouse,
On a rainy afternoon.

Mona Lee Wiseman, Corinth, Miss.

Cowboy's Love Letter

Dear Susie:

I'm a-sitting in the bunkhouse trying not to listen to these noisy cowpokes playing stud while I'm concentrating on what you said this afternoon on Crazy Hill trail. I'm sure tickled, darling, you rode over to meet me and I hope you meant what you said about liking me enough to let me call at your pa's ranch on Tuesday night.

Seems sorta silly to be writing you when you're only two miles away, but I can't get you outa my thoughts. Susie, there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you. I'd sleep in a cave of rattlesnakes if that'd amuse you. I'd climb up Baldy Mountain in a pair of boots soaked in bear grease; I'd break my neck riding that bay bronc what killed Jim last week; I'd swim acrost Mock River where that whirlpool is. I'd start a forest fire and get the Government mad on me to light your way home, if you'd say so. There just ain't anything I wouldn't do for you, Susie darling.

Now, I will be over Tuesday night like you said unless it rains or unless the boys win my horse at poker.

Love,

Jim.

Ethel J. Folsom, Pennington, Minn.

Elbert Fore, Alva, Ky.

Wild Horses

Down from the mesa top they come
Hoofbeats like a muffled drum;
Through the sage, across the plain,
With streaming tail and flowing mane.
Over the brush and rocks they sail,
Scorning to follow a cattle trail,
To reach the spring by the canyon wall
Shaded by willows and alders tall.

There they stop with heads held high
As they gaze on distant land and sky.
They prance and snort, advance, retreat,
Spurning the gravel beneath their feet.
Sniff with suspicion the water's brink
Ere bending their shiny necks to drink;
To see if the enemy, Man, is near;
For he is the one whom they most fear.

The splendid chief stands on a knoll
Guarding his band of mare and foal;
With nostrils wide and eyes of fire
Oh, he's a grand and noble sire.
Ready to challenge the wind, is he
Across that billowing sage-brush sea;
As swift as an arrow sped from a bow
At the sound or scent of near-by foe.

His harem, a motley colored band,
As 'round the water they proudly stand—
A glistening black, and a bay or two,
Of sorrels and paints, there's quite a few;
Yes, and a creamy mare with silken mane
And dainty ears showing Arab strain;
While the yearling colt, close to her side,
Resembles the chieftain in all his pride.

With eager gulps they slake their thirst
Till their bulging sides would seem to burst.
They rest awhile beneath the trees;
Then, a sound or scent on the evening breeze
Sends them racing back on the mesa top,
Or the breaks or badlands, ere they stop—
The noblest creature of God's great Plan
When caught and trained by his master—Man.

Laura May Bachman, Clackamas, Ore.

Lonely

Wal, I didn't think she'd leave me
For she said she loved me true.
Said she loved our dear old prairie
Where the skies are always blue.

Vowed she never more would leave me,
Said she'd marry me in June.
But she's plumb gone and now I grieve me
All alone beneath the moon.

Cowboy Johnny raves of Amy,
My pal Buddy talks of Sue,
Makes me lonesome; can you blame me
'Cause I'm feelin' mighty blue?

All you gals sho' think that playin'
With a cowboy's heart is fun,
Think of all the men that's payin'
For the mischief that you've done.

You with all your winsome powers,
Ere you play us loose and fast,
Think of all the lonely hours
We spend dreamin' of the past.

Never dreamed my gal would leave me,
Of my heart she was the queen,
Now I'm left alone to weave me
Memories of what might have been.

G. I. Wagar, Cameron, Ont., Canada.

Little Papoose

Rockaby baby, in your soft nest,
Sleepy winds sing a papoose to rest.
High in the tree-tops hear his glad coo,
Cool winds drone lullabies all night through.
And wild wood rabbits pause in their flight
To wish a wee man a cheery good-night,
As to and fro on an oaken bough,
Leaves whisper dreams as they fan his brow.

Black the shadows where little deer creep,
To gaze at a baby fast asleep.
Drowsy the sound of nesting bird song,
Crooning a blowing wind, sweet and strong.
High in the tree-tops not a sound heard,
Rockaby baby, rockaby bird.
Big silver moon smiles and looks down
On a sleeping papoose little and brown.

Lura L. Tate, New Haven, Conn.

Old Pioneer

Old pioneer, dreaming in the shade,
Dreaming of the days when the West was made;
Dream on, old man. . . .
Break a new trail, a true trail,
For the pretty prairie schooner to bravely sail.
What's her mustang-power
In this noon-day sun?
Put many notches
On your buffalo gun!
Go ahead, Pioneer, dream your dream clear through!
Dream of the days when the West was new;
Dream, old man,
Of your camp-fire's blaze,
Smoke another pipe in the twilight haze
And dream another dream of the good old days!

John Sydston, Montreal, Canada.

Honorable Mention

Beulah Caples, Pottstown, Penna.
Mrs. Gertrude Kriens, Coyote, Calif.
Daisy Harper, College Springs, Iowa.
Mary Lou Parker, Lane City, Tex.
Mrs. Helen Wethington, Waterflow, N. M.
M. Poloson, Camas, Mont.
Viola McKinley, Mackay, Idaho.

OUT OF THE

Editor's Note:

Tex Sherman, who gives us the latest news of the rodeo world, is a real Westerner. He has punched cows and broken horses throughout the West. He has been rodeo contestant, announcer and judge himself, and is known from coast to coast.

He is willing to answer any questions you may have concerning any rodeo or any cowboy or cowgirl contestant. Don't hesitate to write and ask him for information about the rodeo game. Be sure, however, to enclose stamps for reply.

The rodeo's on, folks. Here they come, "Out of the Chutes" and into the arena, Tex Sherman announcing!

MERT WEATHERWAX, president of the Frontier Days Celebration of Bakersville, Calif., says that he is going to see that the contestants get over twenty-five hundred dollars, and that the entry fees will be added to the purses. This will bring out the cream of the rodeo crop for the show that begins October 1st and runs through the 3rd. Many famous Western movie stars will lead the parade that is under the direction of Lonnie Davis. There will be over fifteen hundred head of horses, ten bands, many old chuck wagons and stage-coaches. If you are going to be in California around this time, drop a line to Bob Hodson, at the City Hall at Bakersfield, and you'll receive courteous help in getting reservations during the rodeo.

Tex Austin, former rodeo producer, is said to have retired from the game and is now running a night club in Santa Fe, N. M. Other old-timers are busy outside the arena:

Billy Binder, an old-time bronc-rider, is now managing a racing stable for a millionaire near Boston. Ray Bell and Dave Whyte, champions back in the days when rodeo was young, are breeding and training polo ponies near Santa Barbara, Calif. Andy Belknap and Tex Parker are both dealing in automobiles, of all things for boys bred on the backs of broncs.

Percy Moore and Fay Ward, popular contesting cowboys, both became fathers of future bronc-riders—if the youngsters have anything to say about it. The great Prairie Lilly Allen, the toast of rodeo a few years ago, still rides a bronc—for the fun of it—and can't resist a rodeo if it's within a few hundred miles of her.

Miss Florence Hope, of Vancouver, British Columbia, came from afar to the Cheyenne Frontier Days and the Pendleton Round-Up. I believe that she probably made the longest trip of all the audience to see this show, but if any of you went a greater distance, drop us a line. No distance is too great to see either of these rodeos, and Bob Hanesworth at Cheyenne and Roy Ritner of the Pendleton Round-Up will be delighted to see that you enjoy yourselves while at their respective shows.

Johnnie Davies, bronc-rider of no little fame, suffered a broken leg while contesting in a rodeo recently held in Topsfield, Mass. Johnnie is confined to a hospital and will be out of the game for the balance of the season, but he amuses himself during the long hot days by avidly following all rodeo news.

While many a rodeo would have canceled the show in order to save money, the Top O'Texas Rodeo, staged annually in Pampa, Tex., opened gallantly into a pouring rain, and staged parades as per schedule. This rodeo is sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Better luck next year, Top O'Texas, and congratulations on your hardy spirit.

The fourth annual Arkansas-Oklahoma Rodeo staged in Fort Smith, Ark., drew a crowd of thirty-five thousand people during its seven performances. That means a comfortable profit in the bank for the 1938 rodeo. Barton Carter directed the arena and George Elliott announced the many events. Keep in mind the dates for next year—May 29th through to June 2nd, because Producer Homer Todd promises another splendid show.

Mrs. Pete Workman, charming wife of that well known bronc-rider, received word that her husband had been killed by a bronc falling with him. She also received many letters and wires of condolence. Then, she received a letter from Pete and he wrote that the show was doing a great business but didn't even mention having been killed. Pete is still tipping over more than his share of broncs, and Mrs. Pete is turning a deaf ear to all such false rumors.

The George V. Adams' Rodeo, held at the Winnebago County Fair Grounds between Rockford and Freeport, Ill., played to twenty-six thousand people. So great were the crowds, another rodeo had to be held a week later. For many years, Adams has been directing his own shows with unusual luck. His outfit has one hundred head of stock and fifty-six top-notch rodeo stars. Little Shirley Adams, his beautiful seven-year-old daughter, is the Shirley Temple of rodeo, and if she keeps on going she'll be the outstanding cowgirl of the game. Billy Crosby handles Adams' arena job and Colonel Hennessey guards the business end.

All but two of the bronc-riders at the Silver City, N. M., non-professional rodeo, were bucked off or disqualified. That alone speaks for the saltiness of Mullens' wild stock. Johnnie Mullens directed the show. These non-professional rodeos seem to have captured the interest of the public, and many producers are beginning to believe that the audiences like them better than rodeos with professional stars.

Charles Tompkins, who used to be mayor of El Reno, Okla., will manage the Oklahoma City rodeo for the second year. Charley used to have a Wild West show of his own and many an old-timer, including myself, used to ride broncs for him. He sure knows how to put on a bang-up show—and I don't mean bang-up entirely from the contestants' point of view.

The Omak, Wash., Stampede paid out sixteen hundred dollars in cash prizes with the entry fees tossed into the purse. That is plenty prize money for a community the size of Omak. Bernard and Moomaw furnished the wild stock. Their wild stock must feed on cactus juice because they are good enough to get the contracts for such rodeos as Walla Walla, Pendleton, Lewistown and Colfax. Incidentally, Colfax is the birthplace of Yakima Canutt who was formerly world's champion cowboy and is now a sensation in the movies.

Cowgirls are sometimes faced with other problems than sticking to a bucking horse. At a rodeo held in New York State recently, the wife of one of the cowboys gave birth to a lusty baby right on the rodeo grounds. Things happened with such speed that there was no time to get a doctor. Jerry Parker, a trick-rider, who also has a diploma as a graduate nurse, took the situation into hand and, thanks to Jerry's intelligence and quick work, both the cowboy's wife and the future bronc-buster are doing well. Such human happenings as this bring rodeo folks close together in warm understanding.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

"OUR AIR MAIL" is running daily among the readers of RANCH ROMANCES in all parts of the world. Its purpose is to help readers make friends with people everywhere, near and far, at home and abroad.

You may write directly to anyone whose letter you find printed in this department. Remember, however, that all letters should reflect the clean, wholesome spirit of RANCH ROMANCES and contain nothing objectionable.

Moreover, this department is intended only for those people who actually wish correspondents. We ask you therefore to refrain from using it as a medium for playing practical jokes, and particularly ***ask you not to sign your letters with other people's names.***

"Rio Riders" Popular

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading "Rio Riders." I enjoyed it very much. Your "Air Mail" department interested me and I would like to hear from other readers all over the world. Come along, friends and exchange snaps with a lonely British stenographer who is not quite nineteen years old.

Sincerely,
ELISE C. FRANKLIN.

12 Three-butt Lane,
West Derby, Liverpool, 13,
England

Marine in China

Dear Editor:

Do you have room for a lonely Marine in your columns? I would like to have a few friends with whom I could exchange news and snaps. I have been in China for eighteen months and will tell you about the people and strange customs. I am twenty-four years old and have blue eyes and light hair.

Sincerely,
HERBERT YOKUM.

American Embassy Guard,
Peiping, China

Lonely Widow Enjoys R. R.

Dear Editor:

I am a widow by death, forty-four years old, but look younger. I have dark hair, brown eyes and I weigh one hundred five pounds. I am five feet three inches tall. I would like to have some pen pals as I am very lonely. Will readers around my age please write to me? Thank you very much for the pleasure I get from RANCH ROMANCES.

Sincerely,
MRS. SUSAN KUNEY.

119 S. Park St.,
Franklin, Penna.

Border of the Rio Grande

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely soldier on the Border of the Rio Grande River. This is my first attempt for pen pals, although I am a regular reader of R. R. I have gray eyes and blond hair and I'm twenty-three years old. I like to dance, swim, ride, fish and hunt.

Sincerely,
BOB BAKER.

16 G.M. Sq.,
Troop B,
Fort Bliss, Tex.

Three British Airmen

Dear Editor:

We are three lonesome airmen in the Royal Air Force. Harold is twenty-two and so is Jack. Frank is twenty. We sincerely promise to answer all letters.

Sincerely,
HAROLD WALKER,
JACK SEALEY
FRANK MELLERSHIP.

No. 63, Bomber Squadron,
Royal Air Force,
Upwood, Hunts, England

Interested in Tap Dancing

Dear Editor:

Here is a plea for pen pals from a very, very lonesome girl. I am fifteen years old, brunette, and I am deeply interested in tap dancing. I will be glad to get letters from all people of all ages. Please, boys and girls, write to me.

Sincerely,

VERA MILLER.

R. 1,
Hooker, Okla.

Wants California Pen Pals

Dear Editor:

I am extremely interested in "Our Air Mail" department as I want lots of pen pals. I am a young man, twenty-eight years old, and have dark brown wavy hair and blue eyes. I would particularly like pen pals from California, but everyone is welcome to write.

Sincerely,

FRANK F. MURRAY.

1200 Pine St.,
San Francisco, Calif.

Collects Stamps and Poems

Dear Editor:

I have read many Western magazines, but none have entertained me like RANCH ROMANCES. I am seventeen years old and I have brown curly hair and dark eyes. My hobbies are collecting stamps and poems. I play a guitar. I would like to correspond with boys and girls from sixteen to twenty-eight.

Sincerely,

GRACE PAUL.

Avon, Ill.

Sunset Province of Canada

Dear Editor:

I am a Canadian girl from the sunset province of British Columbia. I am fifteen years old and have dark blond hair and gray eyes. I enjoy collecting songs, dancing, riding and swimming. I'd like to hear from all parts of the world, especially Texas and Shanghai.

Sincerely,

FLORENCE M. TYLER.

Savona, B. C.,
Canada

An Aborigine King's Son!

Dear Editor:

Having purchased one of four copies of RANCH ROMANCES at a railway bookstall, I was rather intrigued with the pen pal department. Perhaps some of your readers would like to correspond with me if only for the novelty of the thing. Why novel? Well, here's why:

I am a full blooded Australian Aboriginal; son of Walla Curree, King of the Pitta Pitta tribe of Southwestern Queensland. The Dad, I am sorry to have to admit, was, in his young days, somewhat of a savage. Later, being surrounded by white settlers, he received recognition from the Old Government, and, with the fast diminishing remnants of his tribe, settled peacefully among the whites.

I received a fairly good education which I have improved upon by much travel in many parts. The Government kindly grants me the means of living without work, so that I have quite a lot of time to spare when I am not hunting wallabis and kangaroos, etc. I still retain my native liking for wild tucker—I think you call it 'chuck'—but that's been bred in me for centuries.

I might add that I am a Christian, when it doesn't interfere with my own private ceremonies and Corrobesee beliefs. The local sky pilot doesn't read R. R., so I am not in danger of his scorching tongue by making such an admission. He doesn't seem to understand that a man can be good and still eat goanna. However, I'll respect the feelings of your readers, should they write; and I can tell them many tales and true ones.

Sincerely,

JOHN W. CURREE.

P. O. Box 96 Stanthorpe,
Queensland, Australia

"Of Jewish Birth"

Dear Editor:

My sisters and I have been reading R. R. for as far back as I can remember. We think very highly of it. I am a young girl, and have brown eyes and brown hair. I would like to hear from boys and girls of Jewish birth from the ages of eighteen to twenty from all over the world.

Sincerely,

DOROTHY DAVIS.

348 Bathhurst St.,
Toronto, Ont., Canada

Sailors in the Orient

Dear Editor:

We are two sailors serving at the Asiatic Station We are both twenty-four years old. We will be pleased to tell you about life in the Orient. Please don't skip us this time as we are terribly lonely. We are in Tsingtao, China, now, but write in care of the postmaster at San Francisco.

Sincerely,
JOSEPH DRISCOLL,
THEODORE STOVE.

U. S. A. Carapus, 1st Div.,
c/o Postmaster,
San Francisco,, Calif.

California Sportsman

Dear Editor:

I am a young man, twenty-three years old, and have light brown hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from boys and girls everywhere. I like nearly all sports, especially swimming and football. I promise to answer all letters. I think R. R. is truly a great magazine!

Sincerely,
KENNETH BISWELL.

Box 233,
Orosi, Calif.

"No Living Kin"

Dear Editor:

I have no living kin and so I am very lonely. I have dark hair and dark eyes and I'm very jolly. I'm twenty-eight years old and would like to hear from pals from thirty to fifty. There is no other magazine I enjoy like R. R.

Sincerely,
ALICE B. FRENCH

R. 7,
Dallas, Tex.

Radio—Fiction Writing

Dear Editor:

May I have some pen friends who are interested in reading, music, short-wave radio and in doing some fiction writing? I'm twenty-three years old, have dark hair, brown eyes and a sense of humor.

Sincerely,
MISS ROSA HERR.

201 W. Main,
Ardmore, Okla.

Senior in High School

Dear Editor:

I am sixteen years old and a senior in high school. I am five feet six inches tall and have blond hair and gray eyes. I have lots of time to write, so come on, pen pals. I will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
OCA MAE STINNETT.

R. 2,
Vian, Okla.

Old Dominion Boys

Dear Editor:

We are two lonely boys from the Old Dominion State who wish to correspond with pen pals. We are both nineteen years old. Roy has brown hair and blue eyes and James has brown hair and gray eyes. We promise to answer all letters and exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
ROY FLESHMAN,
JAMES FLETCHER.

Pearisburg, Va.

Decorator's Youthful Assistant

Dear Editor:

May I not melt your heart? This is the third attempt to have my letter published. I would like to have many pen friends—sailors, soldiers, cowboys, anyone. I am eighteen years old, have curly dark hair, blue eyes and am five feet tall, and slender. I will exchange photos and souvenirs. I work in a decorator's shop.

Sincerely,
DULCIE MOORE.

C/o Adams Bros.,
180 Queen St.,
Onehunga, S. E. 5,
New Zealand

Red-Headed and Peppy

Dear Editor:

Push over there, pen pushers, and let a red-headed, hazel-eyed girl of twenty in. I'd particularly like my quota of pen friends in soldiers and sailors in His Majesty's Service in foreign lands. My recommendations are pep, stamp-collecting and Scotch-French ancestry.

Sincerely,
JEANNE MAYNARD.

156 Sandwich St.,
Plymouth, Mass.

Idaho Rancher

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of the Double R and would like to have some pen pals from all over the world. I hope this appeal escapes the waste-basket. I am thirty years old and have a six-hundred-acre stock ranch. Milk stock and beef are my main live stock. I am six feet tall and am dark complexioned. I am of Irish descent.

Sincerely,
C. R. HUGHES.

R. 1,
Payette, Ida.

Alaskan Giant

Dear Editor:

I have been reading R. R. for the last three years. I would like very much to have some pen pals. I am nineteen years old and six feet four inches tall. I have brown hair and hazel eyes.

Sincerely,
ALEX BRADLEY.

Box 1527,
Juneau, Alaska

The Texan Twins

Dear Editor:

This is an S.O.S. for pen pals from sixteen-year-old twins. We both have blue eyes and blond curly hair. We promise to answer all letters we receive and exchange snap shots.

Sincerely,
REX and RAY MARSH.

Box 201,
Navarro, Tex.

Enjoyed "Many Moons"

Dear Editor:

I thought the novel "Many Moons" was very good. Let's have more stories like it. I'm twenty-two years old, have brown hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from boys and girls everywere.

Sincerely,
JOE BROYLES.

A-1-5
U. S. M. C.
Quantico, Va.

R. R. for Young and Old

Dear Editor:

I am a constant reader of R. R. and very much interested in "Our Air Mail." I think the Double R is a magazine that is good for young and old to read.

This is my first attempt for pen pals, but I am very lonesome and surely would appreciate some around my own age. I am a widow, fifty-four years old. I love my home, am very jolly, enjoy outdoor camping and traveling. I will answer all letters.

Sincerely,
MRS. FRANCES McCOY.

1453 Stanford St.,
Santa Monica, Calif.

Nebraska Cowgirl

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely cowgirl living in the northwestern part of Nebraska. I have lived here nearly all my life. I am interested in hearing from people from all over the world. I am twenty-one years old and have blond hair and blue eyes. I am interested in dancing, traveling, hitch-hiking and swimming. I will answer all letters, and will exchange snaps.

Sincerely,
MABEL ABOLD.

R. 1,
Rushville, Nebr.

Robertson—Routh

Dear Editor:

We have been readers of R. R. for over two years and like it very much. The stories we like best are those written by Frank Robertson and James Routh. We are in the British Army and have been in India for over four years.

Albert is six feet tall, twenty-four years old and has blond hair and blue eyes. Wilfred is also twenty-four, and has fair hair and dark eyes. We are interested in all outdoor sports. We promise the first ten who write to us a cabinet-size photograph, and guarantee all answers.

Sincerely,
ALBERT ILLINGWORTH,
E. WILFRED DOWNDWARD.

"R" Field Batry., R. A.
Tubbulpore, (C.P.)
India

Works in Bake Shop

Dear Editor:

I work in a bake shop. I am eighteen years old and very lonesome. I have blue eyes and brown curly hair. I would like to hear from boys and girls who read RANCH ROMANCES.

Sincerely,
DORIS KINKADE.

Chauncey, Ohio

Little Cuban Girl

Dear Editor:

Will someone between the ages of twenty-three and thirty write to a Cuban girl? I am thirty-three years old and have brown hair and brown eyes. I would especially like to hear from cowboys, but anyone is welcome. I'll be waiting.

Sincerely,
MISS AMPARO CHAVEZ.

203 Main St.,
Sharpsburg, Penna.

Aussie Cricket Player

Dear Editor:

I have been a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES for only six months but I thought I would write to tell you what an excellent magazine I think it is. I am a young Aussie, twenty-five years old, and have fair hair and blue eyes. I stand about six feet. My favorite sports are cricket, football and swimming, and my hobby is collecting stamps, so let's hear from you stamp fiends.

Some people are under the impression that Australia is a land full of aborigines. Well, drop a line and find out your mistake.

Sincerely,
FRANK P. SMITH.

9 Aveland Ave.,
North Norwood,
South Australia
Australia

Wyoming Cattle Rancher

Dear Editor:

I traveled a lot over the United States and Canada before I settled down and took up a little ranch in the blue grass country of Wyoming. Now I have a fair home, clear from debt, and feel happy toward the world. It's wonderful for everyone to have his own home and be independent.

Land out here is still very reasonable in price. It does not cost much to buy a little ranch. We have a fine climate here. It seldom gets down to zero. The cattle, horses, and sheep graze out all the year round. Mineralogists might be interested in knowing that there is a large deposit of bentonite here—a 70% vein of soda and a deposit of vanadian in rock formation. There's lots of fossil material, forty-five old wells, good fishing and game hunting.

I am six feet tall and weigh two hundred fifteen pounds. I will be pleased to hear from any of you.

Sincerely,
MR. C. HILL.

Star Route,
Spencer, Wyo.

Do You Like Bracelets?

Do you want one of the lovely Trail's End bracelets pictured below? On each of these beautiful pieces of jewelry is the insignia of the Trail's End Club, and the bracelet costs only twenty-five cents.

If you desire one, send this coupon, together with twenty-five cents, to the Trail's End Editor, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York.

I am a member of the Trail's End Club.

I am enclosing twenty-five cents ($.25), for which please send me one Trail's End bracelet.

Name .....

Street or Route Address.....

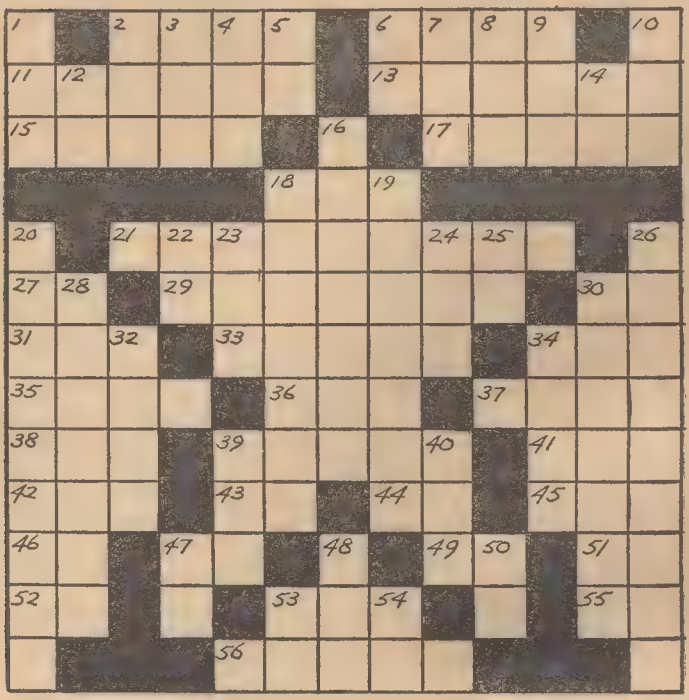
City and State.....

Please print your name and address plainly.

Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.

10-15-37

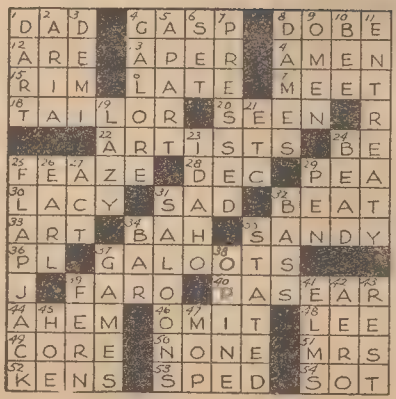
. . The Westerners' Crossword Puzzle . .



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue

Across

2. Single
6. Heavenly body
11. Plastered with mud
13. To tell
15. Famous Texas colonel
17. Singing voices
18. Possessive pronoun
21. Western mustang
27. From
29. Goes back
30. To exist
31. Neither
33. To fasten again
34. Faucet
35. Pleased
36. Hit with the knuckles
37. Young salmon
38. Thigh joint
39. To rent again
41. Anger
42. Small grain
43. Paid publicity
44. Therefore
45. Spanish article
46. Right (abbr.)
47. Upon
49. Father
51. Bone
52. Northeast
53. Cry of a sheep
55. Ego
56. Lone Star State



Solution to First October Puzzle

Down

1. Tag
2. Cry of a cow
3. Japanese sash
4. Born
5. Man's name
6. Senior (abbr.)
7. Beverage
8. Entire
9. Rodent
10. Affirmative
12. To perform
14. Toward
16. Alloy of two metals
18. Remained near by
19. Paints lines on
20. Cattle native to Lone Star State
22. Railroad (abbr.)
23. Over (Poetic)
24. Consumed
25. Exists
26. Dispirited
28. Having leaves
30. Saloon
32. Delightfully transported
34. Caudal appendage
39. Hurried
40. Peak
47. Either
48. Slack
50. Indefinite article
53. To exist
54. Lava

Trail's End Roll Call

Here, folks, are some more new members to welcome into your club:

Mr. Lavern Aldrich, Trent, Ore.
Mrs. Andrew Alford, R. 1, Swan River, Man., Canada
Mr. Marcelino Alonzo, P. O. Box 208, Zamboango, Philippine Islands
Mrs. Elizabeth Anderson, Channing, Tex.
Mr. Elmer Anglesey, 1028 Rose Ave., Vernonia, Ore.
Mr. Leland W. Ambrose, P. O. Box 234, Wailuku, Maui, Hawaii
Miss Janet Armour, 2250 W. 13th Ave., Vancouver, B.C., Canada
Mr. Arnt Arneson, Box 1212, Fort Peck, Mont.
Mr. Kenneth Bannon, 3458 N. Front St., Philadelphia, Penna.
Miss Marie Barker, 702 F.B. St., Wynne, Ark.
Mrs. Loretta Barnes, Box 147, Grants Pass, Ore.
Mr. J. H. Beavers, Box 102, Duncan, Ariz.
Miss Mary Jane Bergeron, West Burke, Vt.
Mrs. Walter E. Billings, Box 676, Redding, Calif.
Mr. Emery Bilodeay, c/o Mundy, East Eddington, Me.
Miss Hallie Blake, R. 1, Cary, N. C.
Mr. D. C. Blandy, 1674 Farlin St., Green Bay, Wisc.
Mr. Herman Bodwell, Wells, B.C., Canada
Miss Laura Bretzlaff, 2539 N. 73rd Ave., Elmwood Park, Ill.
Miss Vurl E. Britsch, Rolette, N. D.
Mr. Wilfred Brodeur, Box 129, Mitchel Field, Long Island, N. Y.
Miss Rosa Brown, R. 5, Box 280, North Chattanooga, Tenn.
Miss Madge Buck, Tree Tops, Albury, Guildford, Surrey, England
Mr. Nile Buckley, Short Creek, Ohio
Mr. Lawrence Buntlin, Star Route, Surrey, N. H.
Mr. Gordon Bussino, Stratton Rd., Rutland, Vt.
Mr. William Cline, R. 1, Box 95, Cloverdale, Ind.
Mrs. Beatrice Colby, R. 1, West Springfield, Penna.
Miss Ruth Collier, Gulf Hammock, Fla.
Mr. Pat Costello, U. S. Veterans' Hospital, Rutland Heights, Mass.
Mr. H. E. Crummey, R. 2, Box 216A, Santa Cruz, Calif.
Mr. C. L. Cutrer, 1016 Deer Park, Jackson, Miss.
Miss Bertie Davis, R. 1, Chatham, Ill.
Mr. Harold Dennis, Vermillion, S. D.
Mr. Russell Derr, 550 Leonard St., Bloomsburg, Penna.
Miss Naomi Dillon, R. 1, Box 135, Charleston, S. C.
Mrs. Irene Doane, 106 Carden St., Union, N. Y.
Mr. Eugene Drawbond, Marlbrook, Va.
Mr. Thomas Driscoll, 2627 Van Buren Pl., Los Angeles, Calif.
Mr. J. R. Edwards, Narrows, Sarn, Nr. Newtown, Montgomeryshire, Wales, Great Britain
Mrs. J. Forkrud, Prince Rupert, B.C., Canada
Miss Kay Francis, 186 Ash St., New Bedford, Mass.
Mr. Charles Frecknall, Bathley, Nr. Newark, Notts, England
Mr. Raymond Freeman, R. 1, Bareville, Penna.
Miss Tony Gaskise, Winston Salem, N. C.
Miss Florence Gass, Fountain Baths, Barberton, Transvaal, South Africa
Miss Ida Glover, P. O. Box 192, Johannesburg, Transvaal, South Africa
Miss Edna Hall, 2477 St. Antoine St., Montreal, Que., Canada
Mr. Michael Hanafin, 83 Little Park St., Coventry, Warwickshire, England
Mr. Ross Harnden, Corral, Idaho
Miss Irene Harrison, 9 Lydgate Rd., Coventry, England
Mr. Otto Henneberger, 267 Woodside Ave., Newark, N. J.
Mr. Adolph Hintz, 1408—8th St., Sacramento, Calif.
Mr. A. J. Hodge, Town House, St. Merryn, Padstow, Cornwall, England
Mr. John Howe, Central State Hospital, Lakeland, Ky.
Miss Norma Hoefle, 805—8th St., Highland, Ill.
Mr. Earl Hurley, Vienna, Md.
Mr. Harry Johnson, c/o Arnott Young & Co., Rawson, St. Halifax, England
Mr. John M. Johnson, P. O. Box 341, E. Shroley St., Nassau, N. P., Bahamas
Miss Helen Jones, Martin, S. D.
Miss Virginia Koch, R. 1, Box 781, Petaluma, Calif.
Mr. Reynolds Langstaff, Drinkwater, Sask., Canada
Mr. R. L. Martin, R. 2, Box 102A, Oregon City, Ore.
Mr. Frank Medlin, Pacelot Mills, S. C.
Miss Helen Medvic, 46 Prospect St., Struthers, Ohio
Mr. Charles Mellinger, 709 St. Joseph St., Lancaster, Penna.
Mr. John Mercer, 71 Prospect St., Rochester, N. Y.
Mr. Benny Musgrave, St. 1, 987 Sherbrooke, Winnipeg, Man., Canada
Miss Mabel Newkirk, Stanton, Ky.
Mrs. Teresa Pfelffer, Route Box 96, Salinas, Calif.
Miss Violet Pletcher, R. 3, Rockwood, Penna.
Miss Emma Schafer, R. 2, Kerman, Calif.
Mr. Donald Schneider, Michael, Ill.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I am a regular reader of RANCH ROMANCES.
I want to become a member of Trail's End Club.

(*Miss*)
(*Mrs.*)
(*Mr.*)

Address.....

City.....

State.....

This coupon makes you a member of America's greatest outdoor club.
Ten cents brings you the lovely "Trail's End" pin.
Address your letter: Trail's End Club, c/o Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York City.
Please *print* your name and address plainly.

10-15-37

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

The Libra Man

THE seventh sign of the zodiac is Libra, the Balance or Scales. It rules from September 22nd to October 23rd, and the man who is born under it is fortunate indeed. As the name of the sign indicates, he is gifted with remarkable mental and physical poise. His is the calm, judicial mind which is able to weigh and decide questions with supreme fairness.

He is quick of perception, attentive to and careful of detail. His understanding of human nature is almost uncanny, and by the use of it he can sway and rule other people, bring order out of chaos.

He is not strongly inclined toward marriage. He prefers his personal freedom and resents the necessity for give and take which is about the first lesson married people must learn. But a girl born under the sign of Virgo or Scorpio should make him as nearly a perfect mate as can be found. Probably his most congenial friends will also be born under these signs. When this man finally marries a girl it is after calm, reasonable thought. He has finally made up his mind he cannot live happily without her. And the girl he asks may be sure the Libra man doesn't go around asking a lot of other girls to marry him. He is far too careful and far too afraid of his precious freedom.

This man makes an exciting and delightful companion. He is gay and cheerful. Perhaps, even, he is a bit careless, for his love of personal ease and pleasure may lead him into lack of consideration of others' comfort. On the other hand he is very sensitive and even just criticism hurts him overly much and will make him feel resentful.

He can make a success of many kinds of work. He may find real fame on the stage or as an orator or a clergyman. The political and diplomatic fields are splendid ones for him. He shines in any profession where he can make full use of his discrimination, charm, and pleasant manner.

Sometimes this man tries to do too much; tries to please too many people. When he finds his perfect mate—one who can guide him without criticizing him, one who can understand his great feeling against any restraining bounds—he will then try only to please her. He is fundamentally a loyal, lovable man.

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends him this coupon in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Avenue, New York. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name..... Sex.....

Address.....

Exact date of birth: Year.....Month.....Date..... 10-15-37

In the next issue Professor Mari will analyze women born between October 23rd and November 22nd.

"And this is Don and his dog"

Just a snapshot taken on the spur of the moment; but a picture that someone is going to cherish for long years to come. And that someone will cherish still more the beautiful big enlargement of this picture just obtained from us.

Haven't you a prized picture, too?

Surely somewhere you have a small photograph of someone dear to you that you think the world of, or a picture that is very unusual and hard to make. Take this opportunity to get a fine enlargement of it for a fraction of what it would cost you at a photographer's store. You'll be amazed to see how much clearer and better in every way the enlargement is.

An 8" x 10" enlargement of your favorite photograph, 25c

and two coupons from Ranch Romances!

This is for the plain enlargement, in black and white. Here are some more offers of equally great bargains—

8 x 10 enlargement, tinted..... 50¢
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5 x 7 " , tinted and framed.. 75¢
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In each case the two coupons from Ranch Romances must accompany the order and remittance.

The tinted enlargements are delicately and beautifully hand colored, which many people prefer to plain black and white.

Fill in the coupon below and put it away carefully. When you get the next issue of Ranch Romances two weeks from now, cut out the coupon from that issue, attach the two coupons to your photograph (send the negative if you have it), and mail to us with proper amount in U. S. stamps or coin.

The enlargement you specify will go to you in a few days, and your photograph will be returned at the same time. We'll return your money if a good clear enlargement cannot be made from your photograph.

You can have as many enlargements of one picture as you want, or enlargements of as many pictures as you want, at the prices named; **but you must send us two of these coupons for each enlargement ordered.**

You will not be asked to purchase anything which you do not order.

RANCH ROMANCES, 50
Dept. D, 515 Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.

I enclose.....¢ and two coupons. Send me one.....inch { plain / colored } enlargement { with frame / without frame } of the attached photograph, returning the photograph at the same time. (Be sure to specify size; and whether or not you want the enlargement tinted, and whether you want it framed.)

Please Print

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Do You Want A Baby?

HUNDREDS upon hundreds of women from Coast to Coast, formerly childless for years from functional sterility, and even often told they could never have children, ARE NOW PROUD AND HAPPY MOTHERS from knowledge and use of a simple home method—details of which I send FREE on request. Parents are admittedly far happier, healthier, more contented, more prosperous and actually live longer as a class than childless couples! A baby gives the real home spirit and ties a husband and wife in truest enduring love and mutual interests. The majority of discontented, unhappy marriages are those of childless couples. *(© 1936.)*

Get This Knowledge FREE

During my 36 years of practice in functional conditions of women I developed this home method, which is described in my illustrated treatise sent FREE ON REQUEST. It discusses many subjects relating to the female organs and tells how you too may combat your troubles as thousands of others have who reported arrival of babies after being childless for years, and report as well satisfactory relief from the various female troubles amenable to correction by this home method. **DR. H. WILL ELDERS, 7th & Felix Sts., Suite 156-L, ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI.**

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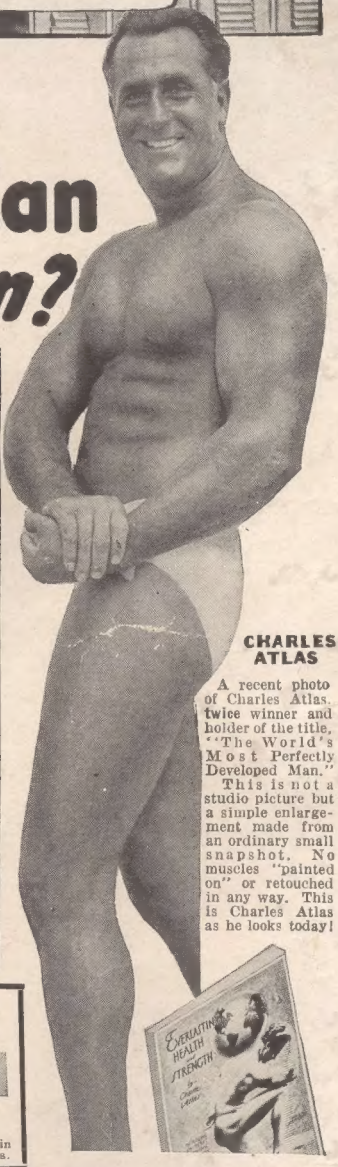
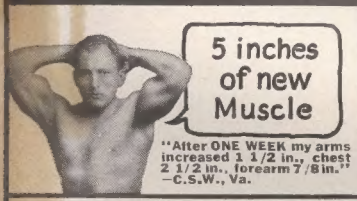
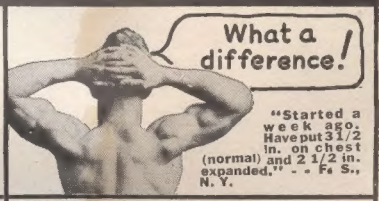


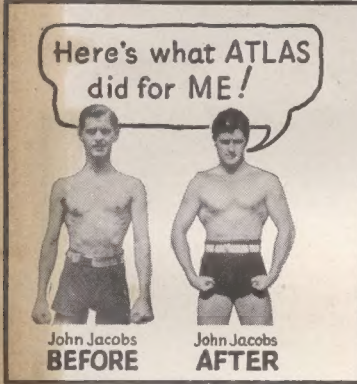
LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE



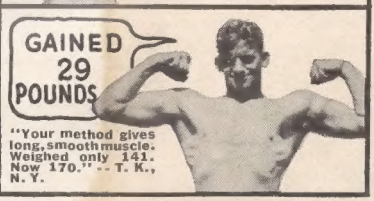
"After ONE WEEK my arms increased 1 1/2 in., chest 2 1/2 in., forearm 7/8 in." –C.S.W., Va.



"Started a week ago. Have put 3 1/2 in. on chest (normal) and 2 1/2 in. expanded." – – F. S., N. Y.



"Am sending snapshot of wonderful progress. Certainly recommend you for quick results!"—W. G., N. J.



"Your method gives long, smooth muscle. Weighed only 141. Now 170." – T. K., N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS

A recent photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

This is not a studio picture but a simple enlargement made from an ordinary small snapshot. No muscles "painted on" or retouched in any way. This is Charles Atlas as he looks today!

7-Day TRIAL OFFER

I could fill this whole magazine with enthusiastic reports from OTHERS. But what **you** want to know is—"What can Charles Atlas do for ME?"

Find out—**at my risk!** Right in first 7 days I'll start to PROVE I can turn YOU into a man of might and muscle. And it will be the kind of PROOF you (and anyone else) can SEE, FEEL, MEASURE with a tape!

My FREE BOOK tells about my amazing 7-DAY TRIAL OFFER—an offer no other physical instructor has ever DARED make! If YOU want smashing strength, big muscles, glowing health, I'll show you results QUICK!

STERLING SILVER CUP BEING GIVEN AWAY

This valuable cup of solid sterling silver, stands about 14 inches high on a black mahogany base.

I will award it, engraved, to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

FREE BOOK I myself was once a 97-pound weakling—sickly, half-alive. Then I discovered "Dynamic Tension." And I twice won—against all comers—the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"!

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Make me PROVE it! Gamble a postage stamp. Send coupon for my **FREE BOOK AT ONCE!** Address me personally: **Charles Atlas, Dept. 9Z, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.**

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SPRINGBOARD ACE. Jane Fauntz Manske says: "When I smoke Camels at mealtimes and after, I find that my digestion runs more smoothly." The best meal digests easier when you smoke Camels.

THREE-TIME OLYMPIC WINNER in the high dive. Dorothy Poynton Hill says: "I prefer Camels because they don't get on my nerves. And, like so many other women, I like Camel's flavor."

WHAT SOME OF AMERICA'S AQUATIC STARS SAY ABOUT SMOKING...

(*Left*) **LENORE KIGHT WINGARD.** She has broken 7 World's Records—16 Nat'l Records—in speed swimming. Lenore comments on smoking: "Camels are certainly mild. They never jangle my nerves."

(*Right*) **HAROLD "DUTCH" SMITH,** who holds Olympic diving championships, says: "I've found great pleasure in Camels. I long ago found Camels restore my energy after a strenuous meet."

(*Left*) **PETE DESJARDINS** — internationally famous diver—speaking: "Divers like a *mild* cigarette that doesn't upset nerves. That's why I prefer Camels."

MISS GLORIA WHEEDEN says: "I always think of smoking Camels and eating as going together."

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Camels are made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS — Turkish and Domestic — than any other popular brand

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